F3381 * [redacted]c * A BANTAM MYSTERY

STEPHEN DAIN, INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE —ON ASSIGNMENT AS A LIVE TARGET IN A DEADLY ARAB SHOOTING GAME.

TIME LIMIT

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

THEY WERE WAITING FOR STEPHEN DAIN . . . in grimy offices and stinking hovels, and a dozen waterholes in the middle of the blazing desert. Waiting with guns and daggers and dreams of ancient tortures.

Because, if Dain got through, the deadly message he carried would signal a requiem for every two-bit Arab politician, cop and killer waiting from Baghdad to Rakka—waiting to murder Stephen Dain!

Stephen Dain Mysteries by Robert Sheckley

- CALIBRE .50
- DEAD RUN
- LIVE GOLD
- WHITE DEATH

Published by Bantam Books, Inc.

TIME LIMIT

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

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To Jason

Chapter 1

Dain landed at Athens Airport shortly before noon. His meeting was for eight o'clock that evening. He checked into the Hotel George V on Constitution Square, showered, and changed into a dark tropical suit. He left the hotel and took a walk to the base of the Acropolis. He ate lunch in a nearby *taverna*. Then he took a taxi back to his hotel.

Promptly at eight he walked to the Hotel de Ville, two blocks away, through a soft and tremulous spring night scented with hyacinth and the memory of nightingales.

The Committee occupied one wing of the fourth floor. A male secretary answered the door, and Dain was admitted into the suite. From within, behind a closed bedroom door, he could hear voices raised in angry argument. When the secretary tapped at the door, the voices stopped abruptly. Dain had the impression that the men within were holding a whispered conference.

"The gentlemen will be with you at once," the secretary said.

"Thank you." Dain sat down on a faded green plush couch. The joy of the memorable Athenian night had left him: he had met too many conspirators in too many hotel rooms. Familiarity bred unreality; all of those endless and inevitable rooms coalesced now into a single impersonal Room—an archetype or Form of a room, with draped windows and worn carpeting, with forty-watt light bulbs casting a faint, dirty yellow light through stale cigarette smoke.

Stephen Dain was a tall, lean man with dark brown hair and a pleasant, somewhat ascetic face. His age was not readily apparent—around thirty, if you went by first impressions, closer to forty if you looked carefully at his eyes, which were gray, insolent, and experienced. It was part of Dain's business to be nondescript, and he succeeded in this moderately well. He hid his virtues for the sake of expediency, and concealed his vices out of regard for his vanity. He did his work well,

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but he did very little else. He was more useful to others than to himself.

The argument in the bedroom flared up momentarily, then subsided into urgent whispers. Dain found nothing unusual in this. The men who occupied these ideal hotel rooms were as typical as their meeting places: Homo Conspirator, the creature that builds for the sake of overthrowing; a distinct subspecies characterized by his extreme propensity toward ritual secrecy.

Not even their causes could separate and define them. Dain had worked for too many causes; they had begun to blend vertiginously in his mind. . . . Committees past and present, to free Angola, Yemen, Kurdistan, Sumatra, Celebes, Tanzania, Ghana, Tibet, Dahomey, Upper Volta; committees of the past, to free Serbia, Bohemia, Savoy, Bearn, Navarre; committees of the future, to free the Madrasis from the Rajasthanis, to liberate the Nuba from the Waziris, to protect the Luabas from the Baluabas. . . .

The bedroom door opened. One man came out.

"Good evening. I am Mr. Luht. You would be Mr. Dain?"

"That is correct."

"If I could just see some—credentials? Thank you so very much."

Slim, nervous brown fingers turned the papers over, surreptitiously rubbing the paper to ascertain its quality. Luht was a tall man, handsome and cadaverous, with a great sweep of a nose, deeply molded cheeks, and a small, tightly compressed mouth. He had an aura of power, impatience, and self-righteousness. A well-known type within the genus Conspirator. He seemed hypertense, he was surely an insomniac. (Since Luht must stay awake nights, he wishes to awaken the world.)

"Excellent, Mr. Dain. You can understand our need for caution. In a matter like this . . ."

A matter like what? Who was this man, what cause did he represent? Was it the South Arabians against the Adenis this time? Or the Bahrainis against the Iraqis, or the Kuwaitis against the Saudis? No, this one was the Rakkans against the Iraqis. . . . A proliferation of causes was a sure breeder of cynicism. Dain had seen too many warring fragments of the passionate world. His feelings told him that it was ridiculous, his intellect insisted that it had to be somehow important. Head versus heart, he was left in the dubious position of working for goals in which he was not fortunate enough to believe.

The other two members of the Committee came out of the bedroom now. Both were smiling sheepishly, like little boys who have been scuffling in the locker room.

"Mr. Dain, allow me to present my colleagues. This is Mr. Bekr—"

A tall, older man with frail shoulders and a long, sad face. His features were frozen into an imitation of dignity.

"—and this is Mr. Raoudi."

A man in his mid-forties, short and plump, with sallow skin and a sparse beard, who blinked nervously while being introduced.

They all sat down. The secretary served sweet Turkish coffee in tiny cups, then withdrew to one of the bedrooms.

Luht asked Dain what he knew about the Rakkan independence movement.

"Very little," Dain told him. "I was briefed on this assignment just two days ago."

"Mr. Welles of your Paris Embassy briefed you?"

"He said that you would fill in anything I needed to know."

Luht smiled and slowly raised his finely arched eyebrows. His expression said that explanation was, if not impossible, then surely superfluous. But he relented and gestured to one of the other members of the committee, who hastily unfolded a map of the Persian Gulf area.

"This is Rakka," Luht said, indicating a shaded area along the westernmost border between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. "It is a small place—not much bigger than the state of Maryland, and about three-quarters the size of Lebanon. It is an area with a substantial ancient history, but very little modern history."

Leaning back, and speaking with dreamy force, Luht outlined the splendors of ancient Rakka. Once it had been an independent state within the Babylonian Empire. Recent archeological evidence suggested that, beneath the site of the present-day city of Rakka, there had been a metropolis contemporaneous with Ur of the Chaldees.

"Then, of course, came various invasions," Luht said. "All of the ancient kingdoms vanished beneath the onslaughts of Tamerlane and Attila. Rakka vanished, as did Babylon and Chaldaea. The people stayed."

The Rakkan people, as Luht explained it, were a separate and distinct racial strain within the Arab world, comparable to the Kurds and the Turkomans. Their nearest relatives were the swamp Arabs of the Mahdan.

The Rakkans had slumbered uneasily down the long centuries of Ottoman domination. They had joined forces with Lawrence in helping to free the Arab peninsula of Turkish rule. But later, in the political settlement, their aspirations for autonomy had been brushed aside by the British in favor of Saudi and Iraqi interests.

But the long sleep had finally come to an end. There were stirrings, discontents, aspirations, and of course a Committee. At one time, France had seemed interested in helping them. Then Iran briefly took up their cause. There was a short period of ambiguous independence. Then in 1938 Iraqi forces "readjusted" their borders and occupied the Rakkan area. After that, there was talk of an autonomous status within the Iraqi state. But the Second World War came. After it was over the Kurdish revolt began in eastern Iraq, and all talk of autonomy was shelved.

The dreams of the Cause began to recede, but new hope came in the 50's with the Saudi-Iraqi rivalries.

In 1952, the area around Tikkan Audi was examined by British and Dutch petrologists. The first proven oil well was brought in in late 1955. During these years the Rakkan nationalists worked within the shifting framework of alliances within the Arab world. A coup was planned in 1959 with Saudi aid. It was canceled when the Saudis, under pressure from Egypt, felt impelled to settle their current differences with the Iraqis.

Since that time the mercurial alliances of the Middle East had continued to shift and change. Hatred of Israel had proven an organizing principle and a distraction from other rivalries. But at present the idea of diverting the headwaters of the Jordan had changed from a plan of action into a pious dream. The war in Yemen had achieved a dubious stability, but continued to canalize some of Egypt's ferocious energies. Iraq's attention was still turned to its own northeast, where the Kurdish nationalists still provided a strong military threat to a shaky government. The country of Saud, after various vicissitudes, had received a few long-needed reforms by Feisal. It was now reasonably steady on its feet and ready to assist its friends and spread confusion among its enemies.

"Accordingly," Luht said, "we have arrived at a time of great possibilities. The moods and dispositions of our neighbors are greatly in our favor. The moment is ripe for us to seize our independence. It might not be this right again for ten years, or for a century.

"I'll take your word for it," Dain said. "You know your neighbors better than I do."

"I know them," Luht agreed. "I know the whole mangy jackal's pack of them. In the Arab world, Mr. Dain, the only true motive for action is self-interest. I think that is so everywhere, but here the emotion is more naked and unashamed. Self-interest is the true religion here, and all else is viewed as fuzzy-mindedness. There is a hierarchy of values, of course. One does not rend one's family if one can claw one's neighbor; and one spares one's neighbor under pressure of a greater hatred of the outsider. It is all a question of degrees of kinship, you see."

"What about kinship with humanity?" Dain asked.

"A meaningless concept at present," Luht said. "But one which we Arabs would feel passionately if the Martians should ever land." Luht smiled and examined his gleaming fingernails. "But since that eventuality does not seem imminent, I think we can stick to the business at hand. The times are extremely propitious for Rakkan independence. Do you not agree, Mr. Raoudi?"

Raoudi started nervously at being addressed. "Propitious? Well, yes, I suppose they are. Although certain key questions—"

"Those key questions will never be answered," Luht said. "One assesses the situation to the best of one's ability, and then takes action. But the action, no matter how well-based or calculated, takes place as it pleases. We cannot control events no matter how tight our grasp may seem; we can hope for no more than to launch our enterprise at the best moment. After that initial launching, it is beyond our control."

"Well, of course," Mr. Raoudi said, "I believe that, as you well know. I was merely trying to point out certain inherent limitations in our state of knowledge."

Mr. Raoudi nodded to himself vehemently and lighted a cigarette.

"Mr. Bekr," said Luht, "what do you think?"

Bekr, with a scholar's stooped shoulders rising on either side of his long sheep's face, shook his head wearily.

"We must be very sure, Luht. The entire affair depends upon one throw of the dice. We must be very careful."

"You have the virtue of patience," Luht said, "but you follow your virtue to excess, thereby making it a vice. Would you care to wait another thirty years, Mr. Bekr?"

"If necessary."

"Your cast of mind will make it necessary."

"Well . . . I am not precipitous."

"No one would ever accuse you of that, Mr. Bekr. Slothful, yes; timid and easily alarmed, of course; passive and easily dissuaded from action, certainly. But precipitous, never."

"You are inclined to be insulting," Bekr said mildly.

"I thought I was being merely factual," Luht replied.

Bekr blinked his rheumy eyes and turned to Raoudi. "What is your assessment of the situation?"

Raoudi looked embarrassed again. He cleared his throat loudly and said, "Certain things are clear. We must act, of course. We must seize opportunity when it is favorable. That goes without saying. But we must not act out of impatience or a mere lust for action. Opportunities are to be seized, surely; but false hopes are not to be pursued. These are extremely weighty matters, and they require a due amount of deliberation."

Luht surveyed his colleagues with smiling sadness. "My poor old friends," he said. "What a sad spectacle you are—you toothless lions! You have whispered in back rooms for entirely too long. Conspiracy has ceased to be a means toward an end for you; it has turned into a way of life. You have become professional planners of an endlessly postponed revolution! You are like college professors lecturing on passion; but the only passion you feel is for your lectures. You have been cloistered away from the world for too long, my friends! You have not had the opportunities I have had to work and fight at first-hand in other liberation movements—"

"We all know of your dedication to the downtrodden of the earth," Raoudi said, with some show of spirit. "It is very fine, I'm sure, in a naive sort of way. But can't we deal with the issue at hand?"

"I thought we were agreed on the need for action."

"We are," Bekr said. "What remains to be determined is the proper moment for this action. And that is a matter which calls for some consideration."

"Mr. Bekr, I think you would feel the need to consider before taking yourself to the toilet. Your bowels would undoubtedly inform you of the need for action; but your intellect would be perplexed with the problem of just exactly *when* would be the proper moment."

"I shall not stay here any longer," Bekr said, getting to his feet.

"Forget it," Raoudi said. "It is his usual ill-mannered way of talking."

"I will stay," Bekr said, "only if I receive an apology."

Luht bowed low and said, "My dear Bekr, if I have put the case wrongly, then I do most sincerely apologize."

Bekr hesitated, trying to decide what the apology was worth. Raoudi tugged at his sleeve, and he finally sat down.

"The situation concerning Rakka is quite clear," Luht said. "The Iraqis have moved nearly the whole of their forces away, to Kirkuk and Irbil in the northeast, in order to hold the Kurds in check. The Saudis favor our plan. They will recognize our government if we are able to take Rakka and hold it for as little as a week. They would even, as matters stand now, assist us militarily to hold what we take. The Trucial sheikhdoms and protectorates support our cause, as does the U.S., Britain, and France. Even the Soviet Union can be expected to recognize our sovereignty, if only because of recent harsh words between them and the Iraqis. That is the situation externally."

"And internally?" Bekr asked.

"There, the matter is even more favorable. The Rakkan people are unhappy about recent Iraqi strictures. We have reached a high-water mark, with over eighty-five per cent of the people strongly in favor of independence, and with an estimated twenty per cent ready to bear arms against their oppressors. But you know all this; the conclusions are obvious. Why must I repeat it?"

"We do indeed know all this," Bekr said. "And, allowing for your natural tendency for exaggeration, it seems more or less true. But the conclusions you draw are by no means obvious. For example, if we are strong now, we can expect to be even stronger in six months. The Iraqis will have their hands full with the Kurds for some years to come. Why must we jump into action right now?"

"Because *we* will *not* become stronger," Luht said. "Our people are not blessed with your inexhaustible funds of patience. They want what they want now, immediately, not next year or thirty years hence. Arms have been distributed, the activists in the city are at a fighting pitch. How long do you think we can keep them in that temper? If we postpone our revolt now, for no apparent reason, then we prove to the people the inadequacy of our movement, and deliver them to groups with greater determination—like the communists. My friends, we make our revolution now, or we relinquish our hold on it for good."

"I am not against action now," Bekr said. "No matter what insults you level at me, I crave my people's independence as fervently as you do. But it is a big step to call for a revolt of the citizens of a small state against a large power. It is a step that can have disastrous consequences, *for them*, Luht, not for you or me."

"I know that," Luht said. "And the people know it, too."

"Of course they know it," Raoudi said, "in a dim sort of way. But they look to us for guidance. We stand, not only for their will to freedom, but also for the necessary intelligence and guile to strike for that freedom at the proper moment. It is a sacred trust."

"Idiots!" Luht shouted. "Are you trying to teach me children's lessons in ethics? Of course the trust is sacred! Of course we must do everything in our power to judge the realities of the situation before we permit the uprising. You pious bastards, why do you think I asked for the assistance of the Americans? What do you think Mr. Dain is here for?"

Dain had been sitting on a couch and thumbing through a magazine. He looked up now and said, "I was wondering that myself."

"Excuse me," Luht said. "These matters should have been cleared up before your arrival. It is unfortunate, but endless discussion and controversy is inevitably the way with political exiles. The further one is removed from any real power, the stronger become one's principles and the more rarefied one's sense of duty. But to the point: I asked for a reliable American agent, Mr. Dain, a qualified operative from your CIA—"

"I'm not from CIA," Dain interrupted.

Luht raised his eyebrows. "You are not?"

"No. You don't have to be in CIA to be a reliable American agent, you know. We also have Army Intelligence, Navy Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and quite a few others."

"Which one are you from, Mr. Dain?"

"I'm from one of the others."

"Does your organization have a name?"

"Sure," Dain said. "Call us anything you like. Call us the Special Services Bureau, Section Two."

"What does that mean?"

"About as much as Central Intelligence Agency means."

"But who, exactly, is your government sponsor?"

"Some think," Dain said gravely, "that we are the long right arm of the Peace Corps. Others consider us a clandestine striking force for the Senate Appropriations Committee."

"I do not like this," Luht said. "This is no time to be facetious."

"It is the best time," Dain said. "Our organization is supposed to be secret. That means secret from you too."

"We had specifically asked for help from CIA—"

"Well, CIA, for reasons known best to them, didn't want to touch you. My people looked you over and decided to take you on. For reasons known best to them. Now, do you want us or not?"

"I had wanted CIA," Luht said stubbornly.

"Hell, if that's all that's bothering you, I've got a card that proves I'm with CIA."

"I daresay you do," Luht said. "Well, perhaps it is unimportant. The name of the organization does not matter. What we need is an American agent upon whom we can rely. We must get from him something which the rest of us lack."

"What is that?" Dain asked.

"The quality of objectivity."

"I think you could use some, at that," Dain said.

"The situation is this: a revolt has been planned in the city of Rakka. The date has been set; it will take place in less than two weeks unless we of the Committee cancel it. On our available information, there is no reason to cancel. Our chances look excellent. But we want to make one final assessment of the situation. We want your judgment. We will base our ultimate decision on the information we receive from you."

"And you want me to go to Rakka, make this assessment, get out of the place, and report to you, all within two weeks?" Dain asked.

"Within twelve days, to be exact."

"That's cutting it a little close, isn't it?"

"Not at all," Luht said. "It is more than ample. It even leaves a margin for error. The facts are already at hand, you see. They are in Rakka, waiting to be taken. But we cannot go in, and the possessor of the information cannot come out."

"Do you trust the person who has this information?" Dain asked.

"We trust him implicitly," Luht said, glancing at the others. Both Raoudi and Bekr nodded. "Since he works for us covertly, we use a code name for him: Raj. He is a young man, a patriot, but unaffiliated with any one man in our movement. His reliability has been proven time and time again."

"And he can't come out?" Dain asked.

"The risk would be too great. He is under some suspicion

by the Iraqi authorities. Any attempt on his part to leave the city would very likely prove disastrous."

"Then why don't you get his information out by courier?" Dain asked.

"The problems are very great," Luht said. "We trust ourselves, and we trust Raj. We trust Ben Alyma and one or two other leaders within the city; but they are established merchants and bankers, they also cannot move without exciting great suspicion."

"You mean you don't have a single reliable courier?"

"We have many. But couriers are weak links in any organization. We assume that the Iraqi secret police have penetrated some part of our group. But we don't know which part, or which person. If this report fell into the wrong hands. . . . Well, it is obvious what would happen."

"Then you want me to act as your messenger boy," Dain said.

"A little more than that," Luht said. "You will have the opportunity to see Rakka and to assess the situation for yourself. We are prepared to accept your instincts on the situation. In short, we would welcome a recommended course of action from you, if you feel capable of making one."

"I'm supposed to get into Rakka, contact your man there, get his information, and get out."

"It shouldn't be too difficult," Raoudi said. "The Iraqi authorities are expecting an Arab courier, not an American. And in addition to that, you will be traveling under an impenetrable cover."

"They shoot you for wearing that kind of cover," Dain said.

"The problem will never arise," Luht assured him. "This is really quite a simple job, Mr. Dain. Since there are no travel restrictions in Rakka, you will simply fly in like anybody else. You will spend a day or two in which you will speak to Raj, and then you will fly out to the independent sheikhdom of Qatar, which you may know is a peninsula on the Persian Gulf. Your flight will take you directly to Doha, the capital, where we will be waiting for you. The entire matter from beginning to end should take no more than five days."

"Fine," Dain said. "But what happens if the Iraqis get suspicious? What happens if all flights are grounded?"

"We considered those possibilities," Luht said. "Obviously there had to be an alternate plan. We considered hiring a fast boat which could bring you down the Persian Gulf to Doha

almost as quickly as a plane. But we had to reject that tempting idea. If the Iraqis did become suspicious, their aircraft and patrol boats would surely search the Gulf. And, unfortunately, they would probably find you. This is the pearling season, and most of the local craft are clustered around the diving areas. One small boat traveling south all by itself . . ."

"And yet," Bekr said, "he would be in international waters at all times, or he would be within the territorial waters of Saudi Arabia or Bahrein or Qatar."

"I thought we had disposed of that plan for good," Luht replied. "If I were an Iraqi faced with such a problem, I would shoot first and apologize later. I assume they would do no less than I."

"I'm willing to assume that," Dain said. "So what *is* your alternate escape plan?"

"To get you out of Rakka and into Saudi Arabia," Luht said. "The Saudis are our tacit allies. They—like the Americans—are not willing to aid us openly just yet; but they will certainly not hinder us. The Iraqis will not pursue once you have crossed the frontier."

"How far away is the frontier?"

"From the center of Rakka you can reach the Saudi border in half an hour."

"That sounds all right. What next?"

"Once in Saudi Arabia, you will continue south to the port city of Qatif. We will have a car *and* a boat waiting there for you. The sea route to Doha would be shorter at that point, and the Iraqis would probably not be searching for you that far south. But if you think it better, you could drive to Salwa, and then up the Qatar peninsula to Doha."

"How long should that route take?" Dain asked.

"About nine days—and that allows a margin for unforeseen difficulties. You should have three days' margin, even if you must go by the slowest means."

"I'd still prefer a few more days," Dain said.

"We can't give them to you," Luht said. "We would not give them to you even if we could. Our best chance of success lies in speed and secrecy. If we gave you an extra week, the impending Rakkan revolt would be common gossip in every bazaar from Baghdad to Rabat."

"You may have had a leak anyhow," Dain said.

"I think not," Luht assured him. "The time element has been planned with great precision. Today is August twenty-fifth. We

will expect you within twelve days. If you do not come, the uprising will take place as planned, on the morning of September seventh."

"I'll be there," Dain said. "But if it has to be the second plan, I assume I'll have some help."

"Of course. We have arranged everything. If the second alternative is required, you will be accompanied to Qatar by men of our organization."

"Your organization," Dain said, without much expression.

"Believe me, it is extremely reliable," Luht told him. "We have been established for a considerable time on the Hasa and Trucial coasts, and on the Persian Gulf islands. We enjoy a good amount of local cooperation. None of the Gulf sheikhdoms and protectorates have any love for Iraqi power."

"Or for Saudi power, either," Bekr said. "But that is not significant in this case."

"I'm curious about one thing," Dain said. "You say you have a trustworthy organization; but you don't seem to have anyone in it you can trust to bring out this information. There seems to be a slight contradiction there."

"I have already explained that," Luht said. "Our people *are* trustworthy; but we cannot afford to take the slightest chance."

Dain nodded, but he didn't look convinced. "All right," he said. Let's get down to details."

The next two hours were spent in a discussion of ways and means, places and persons, and other pertinent information. Dain left at last, ready to continue to Rakka in the morning.

Luht saw him to the door. "We will meet in Doha," he said, "within the next twelve days."

"I hope so," Dain said.

Chapter 2

Dain left the Hotel de Ville at 11:45 P.M. Half an hour later he came to another hotel in Syntagma Square. He went directly upstairs to Room 112. Waiting in the room for him was a short, ruddy-faced American in his fifties. This was Mr. Manley. He wore a plaid smoking jacket, but he didn't smoke. He also wore a genial smile.

When Dain came in Mr. Manley neatly folded his Paris edition of the New York Times and asked, "What did you think of them?"

"Not much," Dain said.

"Did you consider them insincere?"

"Oh, I suppose they were sincere enough," Dain said. "For whatever that matters." He poured himself a drink from an opened bottle of Scotch on the bureau and found ice cubes in the bathroom sink. He sat down in a big armchair facing Mr. Manley on the couch.

"I should think that sincerity matters quite a little," Mr. Manley said. "I'd hate to tell you how many self-styled revolutionaries are leading pleasant and unpolitical lives in Switzerland or France. On our money. I understand the Russians have encountered the same problem. . . . But all of that is in the nature of the game. Now, what about their organization?"

"What about it?" Dain asked.

Mr. Manley frowned ever so slightly. "Well, damn it, man, have they really *got* one? Or are they just talking a lot of hot air?"

"How in hell should I know?" Dain asked. "They talk a good organization, if that's what you mean. For all I know, they could really have one."

Mr. Manley sighed unhappily. "It's all so difficult to know—to *really* know, I mean. All of these people approaching us with their endless *causes*. All of these *movements*, in places no one has ever heard of. There are literally hundreds of them,

Dain, and they all expect Uncle Sam to come up with the bankroll."

"Not all of them. A lot of them take their business to Moscow or Peking."

"Precisely," Mr. Manley said. "And that's a good part of the reason why we must engage in these transactions. Revolutions are for sale, other people are buying them, so we feel that we had better buy a few ourselves. But what do we get out of it, really? What can we possibly gain from this Rakkan revolution?"

Dain shrugged. "If you don't like it, go buy yourself a different revolution."

"I'd like to," Mr. Manley said. "But there's nothing else around at present that fits the bill. My people in Washington told me to bankroll this one if it shows a reasonable chance of success."

"That seems clear enough."

"Yes. But *does* this revolution have any chance?"

"I don't know," Dain said. "I don't have enough information upon which to base a judgment."

"Apparently no one has. But still, I must back it or reject it. . . . Dain, what would you do if you were me?"

"I'd get another job," Dain said.

"You're not being very helpful," Mr. Manley said.

"How can I help you? Whichever way you decide, you'll be taking a chance. I can't take the chance for you. Hell, you know more about this Rakka situation than I do."

"I have read the various position papers," Mr. Manley said. "And I have studied an assortment of classified documents on the subject. They don't really say much, though, when you come right down to it."

Dain finished his drink, sat back in the armchair, and closed his eyes. Then he opened them and said, "I'll tell you this: those men were skilled actors."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they staged a little play for me."

"Please explain," Mr. Manley said, and leaned forward expectantly. He was interested in amateur theatricals.

"According to my briefing," Dain said, "those three men have worked together for close to twenty years. Six months ago they asked for American help, and the services of an American agent. Two months ago they urgently renewed their request. An agent was assigned at that time and a program was laid out, but then the whole thing was canceled. They screamed bloody

murder, and the project was revived. You were sent to provide final authorization, and I was assigned to work directly with them. A few hours ago they made their long-desired contact with an American agent. That was how matters stood when I entered their suite."

"Go on, what scene did they play for you?"

"Not the typical one. Most conspirators, when they really want outside help, try to smooth over their differences in public. These men went out of the way to exaggerate theirs. The roles they played for me were at considerable variance with their public images."

"Could you explain that a little more concretely?"

"Luht, for example, is the youngest of the three. He's known as a man of icy self-control and extreme dedication; a man who doesn't waste his time on nonessentials. But he portrayed himself as an impatient firebrand with extreme contempt for his colleagues. Bekr is considered an egotistic man of great dignity. He's supposed to have a low boiling point and a positive talent for controversy. But tonight he acted like a weary old scholar, and he showed damned little self-respect. Raoudi is usually considered the most prominent of the three, the natural leader. His long suit is patience and unswerving dedication. But the man he played was vacillating, weak, and deferential to young Luht."

"Very strange," Mr. Manley said. "Maybe they were rehearsing the conspirators' scene from an Arabic version of 'Julius Caesar.' "

"I don't know what they were trying to do," Dain said. "But I didn't much like it."

"It may mean nothing at all," Mr. Manley said. "Public images are frequently produced by propaganda. You may simply have witnessed the real men behind the heroic handouts."

"That could be it," Dain said, without conviction.

"What else makes sense?"

"I wish I knew," Dain said. "At the moment, I can't think of any useful end to be gained by them deliberately staging that scene. On the contrary, their actions seemed destructive to their purposes."

"I don't go in much for this type of subtlety," Mr. Manley said, "but do you think they didn't really want our aid?"

Dain shook his head. "They wanted it all right, even though they took the risk of losing it."

"Perhaps they became apprehensive at the idea of really going into action. Choking up, so to speak."

"Maybe," Dain said. "But I don't really think it's that. Those three are perfectly ready to let the blood flow. It won't be theirs, you know."

"Could one or two of them have changed sides? Gone over to the Iraqis or the Russians?"

"It happens all the time," Dain said. "But my intuition—such as it is—tells me that it's nothing like that. I believe these men genuinely desire a free Rakka; under their own rule, of course, but free in any event from foreign domination. I believe that they know what this entails, and that they're not frightened by the prospects. I think that they're damned well planning on having their revolution."

"Then why the act?" Mr. Manley asked.

Dain shrugged. "Maybe they wanted to keep me interested. I just don't know."

Mr. Manley made a face. He stood up, stretched, belched, tried to cover it with a cough, and sat down again.

"Well, damn it, Dain," he said, "this all rather puts me on the spot. I'm Washington's representative in this situation, and I have to say go or not go."

"So which is it going to be?"

"I don't know. . . . I really can't afford another failure. Not after the fiasco in Togoland." Mr. Manley shuddered at the thought. "I suppose you heard about that one?"

"No," Dain said.

"Good Lord, I thought *everyone* knew. It was a complete disaster. They promised us the moon, took our money, and they went merrily off to raid the Nigerian border. They were nothing more than *bandits*, Dain; and I had okayed the project."

Dain poured himself another drink.

"And before that there was that matter in Salvador. One could not, in all honesty, call it a *failure;* but one would have to be very generous to consider it even a limited success. . . . I really don't think I can take another failure, just at this time."

"Then don't take on this revolution."

"But we *do* need a revolution immediately, we really do. We need a good popular cause with lots of justification and international appeal. Damn it, the Russians and the Chinese steal all the good ones, did you know that? We're left with the runts and culls. With our money and power, we could buy any revolution on the face of the earth. I've located some good

ones, too. But some nervous nelly in Washington is always stalling me, asking about their *politics*. It's rather absurd, isn't it?"

"It's a tough spot to be in," Dain said. "But in the meantime, what do you want to do about Rakka?"

Mr. Manley returned reluctantly from the splendors of what might have been. "Well, our people want a revolution, and they want it now. I've surveyed the market, and nothing currently available is anywhere near as promising as this."

"You mean it's the only game in town?" Dain suggested.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Rakka is the first viable project I've seen in the past six months. Some of these other revolutionaries, the dreamers and visionaries . . . But Luht and his people really seem to have something—wouldn't you say?"

"They seem to," Dain said.

"And I would need solid reasons for turning them down at this point. I mean, I can't very well tell my people that Luht and the others were staging some kind of play—can I?"

"I have no idea what you can tell your people," Dain said. "But I sincerely wish you'd tell *me* something."

"Yes, of course. Well . . . All right, Dain, something does smell wrong about this Rakka thing, I'll grant you that. But that's always to be expected to some extent, isn't it?"

"Sure. The question is, to what extent."

"And that is precisely what we can't know. At least, not at this stage. We have to buy the whole turkey before we get a bite."

"So are you buying?"

"That is the only real question, isn't it? Well . . . As you pointed out, it's the only game in town. It sounds all right and it looks all right. It just happens to smell bad. But I guess we'll have to ignore that and just step in and get our feet wet."

"Then you're okaying it?"

"Yes, damn it! I'm okaying it! Dain, you have a nasty habit of harrying a man just when he's trying to make up his mind."

"Sorry," Dain said.

"So the answer is yes, we do it," Mr. Manley said. "I think—yes, I really think that it'll work out all right. Don't you think that?"

"It could work out," Dain said.

"Good Lord, you're not much support," Mr. Manley said. "But, of course, you have your own apprehensions, as is perfectly natural. . . . The fact is, certain things in the situation

are not perfectly clear. I just hope for both our sakes that it all goes as planned."

"I hope so too," Dain said. "But especially for my sake. I could get killed."

"These matters *are* extremely dangerous," Mr. Manley said. "I had forgotten about that."

"I hadn't," Dain said. He got to his feet. "They've given me twelve days to do this job. Give my regards to Washington, Mr. Manley."

"Thank you. Good luck, Dain, and do try to watch out for yourself. These foreign affairs are not worth one's life."

"Still, sometimes that's what they cost. Good-bye, Mr. Manley."

Dain went back to his hotel. He checked absent-mindedly for listening devices, but found none. He undressed and hung up his clothes neatly. Then he brushed his teeth, took a sleeping pill, and went to bed.

Chapter 3

The First, Second, and Third Days

The following morning, Dain was aboard Middle East Airlines flight 642. The jet crossed the Mediterranean in about an hour, and set down at Beirut airport before noon. Here Dain changed to a prop-driven Gulf Airways Corporation plane bound for Damascus and Homs, and also for Sab 'Biyar, Rutba, Karbala, and Qariyat al Gharab.

After Damascus the stops were all alike: the wrinkled desert would grow features as the plane began its descent. Black basalt mountains would appear on the endless gray-brown plain. There would be patches of khaki-colored sand dividing windswept ridges of granite and arid stone valleys. Then the glaring black, yellow, and brown landscape would be relieved by a sudden patch of green. The plane would turn toward it, dipping lower. At last, an oasis would appear. There would be planted fields, a town of stone built near a water hole or a dwindling river. And finally there would be a landing strip with a single Quonset hut.

The procedure was always the same. Cargo and people were unloaded, and more cargo and people were stuffed into the plane. Within the hour they would take off, fly across an identical landscape, and then come down to a duplicate of their last stop. For all Dain knew, they could have been flying in circles.

Finally, after eight hundred miles of the Syrian desert, they reached Kuwait on the Persian Gulf. Dain stayed the night in a hotel, and was back at the airport at dawn. He left on the morning helicopter flight which linked Kuwait with Rakka, and also with the oil fields of Burgan and Al Bahara, and with Bubiyan and Falaika islands.

Rakka was the most recent of the oil-boom towns. From a dreamy, nondescript desert community, it had mushroomed into a minor metropolis. After Kuwait, it was the largest city

within a thousand square miles. It had become a natural trading center for the Bedouins of the Hasa coast, and from as far away as the Summan wilderness in Saudi Arabia. Prices in Rakka were lower than in Hofuf, and its laws were less stringent than those in Riadyh. Its natural harbor at Ras al Badia offered better holding ground than Bahrein's muddy bay. It was a natural trading stop on the long, bleak Arabian coast. And within the last ten years oil had been located in its interior.

Rakka was composed of two distinct and separate cities, the Old and the New, clumsily joined together with ligatures of asphalt and stone. The New City was a mediocrity of wide aimless roads and squat pointless buildings. It had no character, not even a notable idiosyncrasy. It might have been a suburb of Newark, Bombay, or Caracas.

In contrast, the Old City possessed a definite character, of a reprehensible sort. The first impression it gave was of a stifling elusiveness. The cobblestoned streets were no wider than mule paths. The buildings, constructed of a steely gray granite, leaned close; they seemed to be shouldering each other out of the way. The closeness seemed perverse; on three sides there was the desert, a limitless expanse of rock and sand. The fourth side faced the ocean, a desert of a different sort. With all the desert to expand into, the Rakkans chose to build their city nearly toppling into the sea. Or did anyone choose? The impression was that the desert itself had forced this city to the ocean's edge, that the houses and buildings were tightly packed in a mutual and ineffectual defense.

In the Old City, the dun-colored streets curve quickly out of sight, blending into the gray granite buildings, affording no perspective. Flat and hostile, the stone walls seem to advance on you. Hard objects in Rakka are always on the attack; man is always in retreat.

Progress had come to Rakka. The mud huts and stone buildings were joined uneasily to rows of prefabricated houses from West Germany. The old mosque had been hastily repaired, and five coffee houses with neon lights had opened in the last month. There was a scattering of inns and restaurants. An enterprising Yugoslav had opened a Western-style hotel near the Ras Shurwain headland. He called it the Imperial.

For a European, life in Rakka was preposterous but interesting. The lanes of the Old City had been built to accommodate donkeys; now the right of way was a contest between men, mules, camels, and Volkswagens. This could not be changed now; but the streets of the New City were easily as

wide as the Champs-Élysées. Inspite of that, they were usually jammed with Cadillacs, oil trucks, Land Rovers, and men, goats, mules, and Volkswagens.

Everyday dress in Rakka ranged from Biblical to modern, and included many variations of both. There was an air of genial immorality about the city, of promise and ugliness, material wealth and spiritual starvation. The Faithful were called to prayer five times a day; but Radio Cairo blared its panaceas louder than the leather-lunged muezzin.

The streets were always dense with people. Aside from the tough local breed, there were drifters and dissidents from every corner of the peninsula, and from as far afield as Shiraz and Bushire. A colony of Indians from Bombay had a stranglehold on retail foods. A small, earnest group of Red Chinese were learning the Gulf dialect of Arabic and looking around to see what trouble they could stir up. Somalis were working on the docks, and they had already formed a union.

Nearly everyone was addicted to kif, outdoor living, and incessant politicking.

Wherever you found a crowd, you also found policemen; many of them, though perhaps not enough. They were all from Iraq—Baghdadis for the most part, but recently reinforced by a contingent from Basra. They were young, khaki-clad, armed with machine pistols and truncheons. They were strangers and intruders in this southern desert country, and they knew it and didn't like it. They patrolled in threes and fours, and they watched the crowds. The crowds watched them, made their calculations, and waited. The policemen knew what they were waiting for. They would have enjoyed machine-gunning the whole insolent lot. They wanted badly to go home.

Dain was traveling under the cover name of Charles Ronald Pearson. He was supposed to be an oilman from Oklahoma, and to have prospected extensively in Central America.

He knew next to nothing about oil, and had neither the time nor the inclination to study the subject. Dain had definite theories about that. He really and truly believed that a little learning was a dangerous thing. He considered it worse than useless to try to work up a respectable acquaintance with a complicated subject in a few days or weeks. He believed in other pathways to illusion.

Dain knew the limitations of his own acting talent. And he also tried not to con himself while trying to con others. He substituted patience for skill, and accentuated his eccentricities to

make up for his meager acting ability. It was hard to know whether this theoretical approach was really worth the effort, or whether a less stringent method would have worked as well. Dain didn't care. His method had, to date, kept him a safe distance away from foreign people's firing squads.

On the morning of May 30th, he checked into the Hotel Imperial in Rakka as an oilman—a sick oilman.

Dain's opening words to the hotel clerk set the tone for the subsequent development of his character.

"The name is Charles Ronald Pearson," he told the clerk. "I have a confirmed reservation. I want my room immediately, and I want a doctor."

The clerk, a dapper little Lebanese, saw a tall, grim-faced American standing stooped at his desk. The man was deeply tanned, but there was a faint yellowish cast to his skin. (That was Dain's natural complexion; it was unremarkable unless you thought of him as unwell.)

Dain may not have known anything about oil, but he knew a great deal about hypochondria. He had a sure feeling for the expression of bodily discomfort. His task was aided by the inevitable mild dysentery which attacks the newly arrived visitor to the Middle East. It enabled him to get more deeply into the role.

The clerk had Dain's room prepared. He sent for the European doctor and expressed a polite sympathy. Privately, he classified Dain as an easily recognizable type of European traveler-hypochondriac. Sensing this, Dain was satisfied. He wanted to be stereotyped, pigeon-holed, and written off. If he could pass the scrutiny of an experienced hotel clerk—which meant, almost by definition, a first-rate natural psychologist—then his disguise should be proof against the less well-developed suspicions of others.

For his entire first day in Rakka, Dain did not emerge from his room. The doctor came and went. Dain sent up for newspapers, toast, and tea. In the evening he ordered poached eggs, but sent them back to the kitchen untouched.

On his second day he emerged, sullen-faced and shaky, armed with a bottle of Entero-Vioform and numerous antibiotics. He hired a taxi and visited several oil fields. He asked no questions, but took down notes in a clumsy code of his own devising. He stayed out less than three hours, and then returned to his room.

He made several telephone calls that afternoon: to a travel agency, to arrange a trip to the Baka fields in Saudi Arabia,

and to the government office in Rakka, inquiring as to current policies on the leasing of oil land. Upon being asked, he stated that his interests were academic, and that he was contemplating no purchases at present.

But he also telephoned a geological survey office and arranged to talk with one of their geologists. And then he phoned a real estate concern and asked for a copy of their commercial listings.

Locally, in the government offices and in the bars where the European and Japanese oilmen gathered in the evenings, Dain's heavy-handed secretiveness was considered laughable. His motives were quickly analyzed; obviously he was a type—a hypochondriac and an obsessively suspicious man who was looking for a chance to make a quick killing. He was a strange human being, this Charles Ronald Pearson; but then, places like Rakka attracted strange human beings. There was old Leo Grimpsehl, for example, who had brought in the Bahr-el-Azr field, was rich and literate, but seemed to consider bathing an unnecessary waste of time. There was Arnold Morrison, who liked to pretend that he didn't understand Arabic so that he could listen to gossip in the bazaars. And there was Roger Corram, who liked little Arab boys, and Giancarlo Damiato, who slept with a loaded revolver under his pillow.

Pearson's abnormalities were so normal that no one thought to question his professional credentials. Why should they? No one had ever examined Damiato for his knowledge of igneous rocks, or asked Morrison just how much he really knew about antidomes and placers.

The surveyor came to Dain's hotel room in the late afternoon. He was a slim, dapper young man, born in Rakka of a prosperous family, and educated at el-Azahr University in Cairo. His name was Hassan el-Dihn el-Aoudi. He was twenty-four years old.

Hassan was brisk and cool. He shook hands, sat down in a straight-backed chair, and opened his briefcase.

"I think," he said, "that I should explain at the start just what our company can and cannot do, and what fees we charge for our various services. In that way there can be no misunderstanding."

"It sounds like an excellent approach," Dain said. "But it might not be necessary. I've heard all about your service from one of your clients—Mr. Luht, I think he said his name was."

Hassan sat up straighter. "Luht? The name is not familiar . . . unless you mean Mr. Abdul Luht of Qaiyara."

"No," Dain said. "I mean Mr. Ali Luht of Ash Shihr on the Hadhramaut coast."

Hassan frowned deeply. "That sounds *faintly* familiar. But the city you mention is on the Zufar coast, is it not?"

"I think not," Dain said. "The city is near Jabal Samhan, and just below the headland of Ra's Musandam. Mr. Luht sometimes refers to you as Raj."

"All right," Hassan said abruptly, "I accept you as Mr. Luht's agent. These recognition words are absurd, in any case; Ash Shihr and Ra's Musandam are nearly a thousand miles apart."

"The idea is to prevent an inadvertent identification. You know what I'm here for?"

"Yes, of course. You are here for information, and I have it for you. Tell me, is the Committee still planning the revolt on September seventh?"

"They are. Unless I bring them good reasons for postponement."

Hassan closed his briefcase and moved to a more comfortable chair. He lighted a cigarette and smoked for a few seconds in silence. Then he said, "You won't like my report."

"It's unfavorable, then?"

"Yes, you could call it that . . . if you could call a hurricane a nuisance."

"Whatever it is, I must hear it and bring it back to the Committee."

"You shall hear," Hassan said. "But as for bringing it back to them, you may find that difficult. Things change here very rapidly, Mr. Pearson. The Iraqis are not completely asleep."

"Then they suspect me?"

"Your cover is quite impeccable," Hassan said. "Nevertheless, you may reasonably expect to be arrested within the hour, tried before dinner, found guilty by dessert, and sentenced with the evening coffee."

"How in hell . . . Never mind, let's take it step by step. First I want to hear your report."

Chapter 4

The problem in Rakka was always one of learning the right things at the right time. And that called for the right man being present at the right time.

Iraq is very large, and Rakka is extremely small. A revolt for independence could succeed—but it had to be timed with great care. There were essential requirements: it had to be sudden, well planned, and truly representative of popular sentiment. It had to succeed almost at once, before the Iraqis could react militarily. An unopposed provisional government had to be set up, a high-level deputation sent to the U.N., and recognition from other sovereign states had to be obtained.

These were the political realities: if the Iraqis could react in time, they would be *crushing a revolt of a dissident ethnic minority*. If their reaction was not quick enough, then the revolt would have become a *people's revolution*, and the *dissident leaders* would have become leaders of a *separate and independent government*.

The first and most basic question was: how quickly could the Iraqis move? What was the minimum time they would need to transport a force in at least regimental strength to Rakka?

Hassan was uniquely well placed to learn some of the answers.

Hassan was judged "unpolitical" by the Iraqi authorities. They did not find this status really satisfactory, of course; it was a negative statement, at best. It meant that he was, to all intents and purposes, not against Iraqi rule; but it also meant that he was not for it. Man, say the politicians, is a political creature. There are no neutrals, no uncommitted masses, no "unpolitical" men. Those who profess a lack of commitment are simply unenlightened. Their very nature demands social involvement; it is simply a question of when, and for whom.

This view, much in favor in the offices of the secret police in Baghdad, and reflected faithfully in provincial branches such

as Rakka, meant that Hassan was, at best, considered tentatively and provisionally reliable, and to be watched with some care.

This appraisal, coming from a secret police chief, had to be considered an extremely adequate character reference. In a land where every man is to some degree suspect, and an intellectual (that is, anyone with a college degree) is assumed to be dangerous until proven otherwise, the least suspect man is automatically the most trustworthy. By this standard, Hassan was in excellent standing with the professional police ferrets.

His job took him around the countryside, mainly within the borders of Rakka, but occasionally as far afield as Basra and Hofuf.

Hassan traveled, kept his eyes open and his mouth shut, and performed his duties in an exemplary manner.

Three weeks ago, he had been sent to conduct some tests in the northern sector of the country, in the area around Wadi Haramouna. It was a restricted military zone, six hours' hard drive from Rakka and less than twenty minutes from the Iraqi border. It was a country of low barren hills and parched riverbeds. No life seemed possible in that wasteland; yet in the space of an hour Hassan saw two gazelles, a vulture, and an armored brigade.

Gazelles and vultures were only to be expected; an armored brigade, while not as startling as a genie nor as rare as an auk's egg, was not something one stumbled across every day. Like mutilation, it was an undeniable fact which one never expected to encounter personally.

Hassan saw, on the flat plain below him, a large assembly of vehicles and men. The men were housed in surplus British army tents, their sides raised to catch any stray whisper of wind. There were a hundred or more of these tents, and men in battle dress moved among them.

To one side was a group of larger tents, set apart from the rest, with armed guards in front of them. An Iraqi flag drooped from a jointed aluminum flagpole. It was flanked by two regimental flags.

The vehicles were parked in neat rows some fifty yards from the encampment. Hassan saw a dozen tanks, eight or ten half-tracks, some jeeps, and one rocket-launcher. Beyond these, with less certainty, he saw two or three self-propelled guns. One flat-bedded truck appeared to be carrying mortars. There were four or five jeeps with .50-caliber machine guns mounted in their rear.

The entire area was enclosed in a rudimentary barbed-wire fence and patrolled with armed guards.

There was a field kitchen of fair size, and five or six cooks were at work. Latrines had been dug on the periphery of the encampment. Hassan counted five of them. They represented a dismaying number of hours of hacking at the flinty ground.

After about three seconds, Hassan retired with military prudence. There was no need for a second look; one good look and one good smell had been enough. He got back to his jeep and drove about five miles. Then he stopped, took a sip of water and a cigarette, and tried to think. He was a badly shaken young man.

What he had seen could cost him his head. Evidently someone had slipped; he should never have been allowed into that sector. He had seen something secret; so secret that the military had not even wanted to advise their own local authorities about it. But when they found out about him . . .

He calmed himself and tried to be reasonable. He ran through all the possible reasons for a brigade to be encamped at *that* spot.

Training maneuvers? Out of the question. There was no room for maneuver in that locked-off corner of land. Nor was there any reason to use it for practice in desert warfare: Iraq had several thousand miles of its own desert, Al Hajara, just north of the Rakkan-Saudi border.

He had to assume that the troops were there for a purpose. It could be a show of strength on the Saudi-Arabian frontier . . . except that it would have no effect in this deserted area.

Might it concern Kuwait? Unlikely. There was difficult mountainous country toward the west; while the easiest and best attack route was several hundred miles away to the northeast, along the flat, undefended border.

The problem was intensified in view of Iraq's current situation. The Kurdish revolt had flared up again recently; half or more of the Iraqi army was scattered in the mountains of Kurdistan, dealing with a dozen outbreaks from Sulaimaniya to Amadiya. The rest of the army was urgently needed to garrison the restless cities of Baghdad and Basra, to maintain normal guard on the frontiers, and to act as support and reserve for the fighting forces.

And yet, an armored brigade had been taken from these inadequate forces and sent in secrecy to Wadi Haramouna, hundreds of miles from any trouble spot except Rakka.

Hassan found the conclusion inescapable. Trouble was ex-

pected in Rakka, and soon. Since its presence was being kept secret, the brigade was not here to intimidate; it was here to act. Therefore, the plan for the Rakkan revolt had either been anticipated or revealed. This armored group seemed designed as a counterstroke, poised and waiting, intended to cut off any action at the beginning, before it could develop into a serious situation.

Hassan started up his jeep and began driving toward the police post at Samah, which he had been using as his base of operations. He was very thoughtful. When he was still two miles away, he stopped again. His own position was precarious now. There were some necessary things to be done before returning.

What he had to do took about an hour's hard work. Then he continued slowly to Samah.

The Iraqi lieutenant and his five soldiers came out into the scorching sunlight to greet him: a noteworthy event in itself. Hassan noticed that the soldiers were carrying their Lee-Enfields instead of wearing them slung over the shoulder. The Lieutenant's hands were empty, but the flap of his pistol holster was unbuckled.

"Well, Geologist," said the Lieutenant, "how did your work go today?"

"It didn't go," Hassan replied.

"How so?"

Hassan pointed. The jeep's left front tire was flat. One could see the jagged slashes which the basalt had left.

"A great pity," the Lieutenant said. "But what about your spare?"

"This *is* the spare. The regular tire went first."

He pointed to the back seat. There was his regular tire, similarly slashed.

"But surely you have encountered rough country before? Surely you have managed repairs?"

A speech was called for now, and Hassan made it. "I have driven over some of the worst country in the world," he said. "There is nothing harder on a man or on a vehicle than these deserts of the east Arabian peninsula. I have surveyed in the Arma plateau, and along the Jafura coast, in Ad Dahna, and even into the Rub' al Khali. I have encountered some strange things before; but not like this."

"What happened?"

"I came onto a lava field, which was like driving across a

bed of broken glass. The damnable place was buried beneath half an inch of sand; enough to conceal it, not enough to protect my tires. I made repairs, of course; otherwise I would still be out there. I turned around and came off that lava field, fixing my tires as often as they blew. I fixed them until they were more patches than rubber, and I had used up my entire repair kit. I shall have to beg a few more patches from you, Lieutenant, so that I can get back to Rakka."

"Too bad, Geologist," the Lieutenant said. "Did you manage to get your job done?"

"No. It was simply not possible."

"How far did you get?"

"To just this side of Wadi ad Dawasir," Hassan said, naming a dry river-bed about six miles to the west, and well outside of the brigade's area.

"And you encountered lava there?"

"Not on the straight run," Hassan said. "I had turned to the south first, to examine some outcroppings. I could show you, if you're really interested."

The Lieutenant considered for a little while. He didn't trust Hassan; but then, he didn't trust anyone. The afternoon sun glared white in his face, and he decided that the matter was unimportant.

"Come inside and take some coffee," he said. "As it happens, it is just as well that you didn't get past Dawasir. I was telephoned shortly after you left and told that the Military Zone has been declared closed to everyone."

"Why is that?"

The Commandant shrugged. "They didn't choose to enlighten me. It is probably because of a Bedouin raid, or some other nonsense."

"Probably," Hassan said, with equal indifference. "In any event, I would appreciate some coffee."

That was the end of the incident, and of Hassan's report. The meaning was clear. The revolt might or might not have been anticipated; in any event, it would have to be postponed. Nothing could succeed as long as that brigade was in position.

The next stages of the operation were clear enough. Hassan would leave the hotel now. Once clear, he would telephone Aziz Aouad ben Alyma, a local merchant and the man designated by the Committee as Dain's local contact and control. Ben Alyma had his orders from the Committee, and was responsible for Dain's safety. It was up to him to tell Dain how

soon he could leave Rakka, and how. It was up to Ben Alyma to make sure that Dain reached Qatar in time to deliver his report.

Ben Alyma's presence was a standard safeguard, more in the way of additional precaution than a present necessity. Dain's cover seemed secure; unless he received instructions to the contrary, he planned to leave on the morning flight to Kuwait.

In anticipation of this move, he called his travel agency and made the arrangements. He had dinner sent up to his room, and spent the evening reading and waiting for Ben Alyma's call.

Chapter 5

Like most cities of any character, Rakka changed its face after dark. By day it was an ill-sorted collection of exotica, a storybook city for a latter-day Haroun al-Rashid. By night, it took on an air of contemporary menace. Walking the streets at noon, you considered the imminence of revolution; in the same streets at midnight, you weighed your possibilities of meeting a sudden and violent death.

The inhabitants of the place were inclined toward a puritanism somewhat milder and more superficial than the Wahhabi brand, but real and confining nonetheless. No bars served liquor, no television blasphemously portrayed the human body, no night clubs catered to the mirth of men. Once there had been a house of prostitution on the edge of town, discreetly run by a Somali syndicate. The police had zealously closed it down. That left homosexuality and rebellion as the two main outlets for stifled feelings.

After the evening prayer, most men retreated behind their blank courtyard walls. But some work in the city went on around the clock—at the docks, at the new refinery. Some restaurants and coffee shops—owned by enterprising Persians and Indians—stayed open for this clientele.

The workers used these places, but nonworkers used them more. Both of these classes, but especially the nonworkers, were complete political animals. These thin-faced fantasists, these ragged dreamers, could spend a lifetime lounging beneath the neon café lights, orating on the evil of the times. Their passivity and inertia were notorious; but they could also combine and explode into an unexpected frenzy of activity. Unreliable soldiers, uncertain human beings, their passion was noise and their product was hot air. In many ways they were ridiculous; but they could not be discounted. These fickle hordes had marched before, and would march again.

But before they marched, they would conspire.

Aziz Aouad ben Alyma picked up the telephone.

He was a thickset middle-aged man with a short, luxuriant beard. He had a pleasant, full, unlined face, now set in a somewhat strained expression. He sat in the Café Metropolos, near the Bedouin Market, in a little booth in the back. There was an endless blare of music from the radio in front; this acted as his curtain of sound, his shield against eavesdroppers. On the table in front of him was a cup of coffee, a telephone, an ashtray filled with butts. He smoked Galoises, a habit he had acquired years ago in Syria. His hands were sweaty. He lighted a cigarette and dialed.

"I wish to speak to Hassan, please."

"Is it you who called half an hour ago?" It was a querulous old woman's voice.

"It is."

"And you also called an hour before that?"

"Yes."

"Then for the love of God, don't call here again! I told you I would deliver your message. Had he come here, he would have returned your call. But he has *not* come here tonight, and you must stop telephoning."

"It is very important—"

"So is my sleep!"

She hung up. Aziz muttered a curse and put down the receiver. Hassan was two and a half hours late. And he was nowhere to be found, nowhere at all. Something had suddenly gone wrong. Events which should have been his to command were moving beyond his comprehension. It was necessary for him to act; but what action should he take?

He made up his mind. He picked up the telephone and made another call.

"Hotel Imperial, good evening."

"Good evening. Connect me with Mr. Charles Ronald Pearson, please."

"Who is calling?"

Ben Alyma thought for a moment. "Idris ed-Zelychi."

"I am very sorry sir. Mr. Pearson was indisposed when he went to bed this evening. He left word not to be disturbed."

"It doesn't matter, call him. This is an urgent matter which he has been waiting to hear about."

"There were no exceptions."

"Call him! It is a business matter; there will be a reward for you."

"Sir, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to serve you. But orders are orders; by disobeying, I could lose my job."

"Fool! By blind obstinacy in the face of an emergency, you can also lose your job!"

"I think not," the clerk replied. "Willfulness is punished, but not strict obedience. Would you care to leave a message, sir?"

"I'll call again," Ben Alyma said, and hung up.

Something had gone very wrong. Hassan had not showed up, and Dain could not be reached. He knew that he had to find out what was happening. He had to try, no matter what the price of knowledge.

He reached for the telephone. . . .

In his cubbyhole office on the second floor of a condemned building near the R'as Aguila docks, a man put back a telephone very gently upon its cradle. He smiled, he frowned. He leaned back in his creaking armchair and contemplated the web of lines in the cracked plaster of the ceiling.

He was a man of various names and identities, which he could change into and out of as though they were a wardrobe of strangely mingled clothing. He was a naturally devious man, and he balanced his schizophrenic propensities by combining them with a few fierce loyalties—hidden loyalties, but true ones all the same. He adhered to them fanatically; they were the only points of reference he possessed. With them he could retain his sanity.

He was a true actor, entering fully, to the depths of his being, into whatever part he played.

Strictly speaking, he did not act—he became. He did not portray—he was.

At the moment he was Suleiman, and the sign on his door said he was an importer. He was Suleiman, who didn't care where his office was, as long as it was near water. Where there was water, there was also the possibility of escape. From what? From the present dangers which must always be run by a homeless man. To where? To a place of anonymity, which would become dangerous as soon as it became intimate, comfortable, homelike.

Still, a man must live. Suleiman managed to accomplish that, and a little more besides. He considered it unfortunate that, in order to maintain life, he had to cause pain. Sad, but as inevitable as everything else in life. (We do not choose our

means; we follow paths which have long been predestined. The course of our lives is graven upon our hearts; since this is so, we must submit.)

Suleiman managed to submit with a good show of grace; almost as if, had destiny not predetermined his course, he might have chosen it himself.

He dealt ostensibly in the buying and selling of dried fruit. In actuality, he traded in knowledge. This was the commodity which he bought cheap and sold dear. When no knowledge was available for him to sell, he stole some. When there was none to steal, he invented some.

He was a man without a country. He had been born in Eritreia of Syrian parents, raised in the slums of Capetown, Bamako, and Salisbury, educated for six months at Al Hira University in Amman. He traveled on a Libyan passport, since neither the place of his birth nor of his parents' birth wished to acknowledge him. He had other passports as well.

Home was wherever he happened to be; loyalty was owed only to that which accepted him: himself. He worshiped God, but suspected that the feeling was not reciprocated. He had no friends, since he traveled too light and fast for excess baggage. He had no wife, since he had no home. He had no children, and therefore no future.

He also had no regrets. If he had ever allowed himself to have them, he might have been washed away in his own tears. Instead, he had trained himself to consider everything he could not have as superfluous. That hadn't been too difficult; it had been much harder to learn to like what he could have. But he had mastered that, too; and thus he stood, a triumphant product of his own will to conditioning.

He dealt in information. He had received some just now; a veritable cargo of information, and from a completely unexpected source. He had, in fact, received too much; Suleiman was a retailer of secrets, not a wholesaler. He was perfectly willing to take small risks for small profits. He had no objection to earning more; but not if failure could cost him his life.

So there was good reason to stop, to think, to consider alternatives and weigh possibilities. All of which Suleiman did, but without much conviction. He was caught in his own web of predestination. The road ahead seemed fated, and sure as death; it seemed past any doubt to be *his* road, his own unique highway into the unknowable and ironclad future. Therefore he submitted, just as he would have done if he had considered himself in a state of freedom.

That was Suleiman's life; he had constructed it intellectually, but he lived it emotionally. That was Suleiman's psychology and his religion; they were products of his calculating rationality—synthetic, artificial, and completely true. There was no seam or flaw between the man within and the contrived character without. His identification with his role was complete and totally without reservation—for as long as he remained in that role.

He was, at the moment, Suleiman. In another moment, or another hour or day or week, if his secret loyalties demanded it, he could be someone else.

He picked up the telephone.

Half a mile from the Bedouin Market in Rakka there is a small square with a dry fountain. This is the Zocalo Chico. The northern route to Kuwait and Iraq begins here. It is a comfortable square of well-kept shops and coffee houses, shaded with striped café awnings on three sides. There is a row of well-kept buildings on the fourth side. This is Rakka's administrative center, prosperous and busy by day, deserted at night except for police patrols.

Lights are burning on the fourth floor of the center building, and the old elevator operator is dozing on a backless wooden chair. To the susceptible, those lighted windows seem to glare across the city like the eyes of an angry wolf. Many townspeople make a sign to avert the evil eye when they see this. Those late-burning lights are in the offices of the police—the regular, the special, and the secret. It is a mark of Rakka's bad luck that the constabulary is the only efficient branch of the local government. And like the ominous suffocating silence before a tornado, it is a sure sign of evil times ahead when the police labor deep into the night.

The city sleeps fitfully, a sleep without refreshment, tinged with the anticipation of nightmares. Men awaken for no reason at all, get out of bed, and look for the tenth or ten thousandth time at the Sten gun wrapped in oilskins beneath the brick floor, at the Browning automatic pistol in the mattress, at the bandolier of grenades hidden in the thick mud wall. They touch their weapons and are reassured, but their women feel only the high quaver of mourning in their throats.

The city is filled with guns; but tonight the lights burn late in the offices of the police, and the men of the town touch their guns, count the days and hours on their fingers, and wonder if something has gone wrong.

Colonel Zeyd, Commandant of Police for Rakka, put down the telephone.

He was a large, heavy man in his early fifties. His khaki uniform was spotless in spite of the clinging heat. His hands—hairy, immaculate—closed for a moment on each other. Then he ordered them to stand at ease, and they did so with military precision. He turned his chair around and looked, pensively but with a soldier's eye, out the window. His fourth-floor office commanded an excellent view of most of the Old City. He saw the city two-dimensionally, as a combat map. Machine guns were best sited there and there. . . . Street fighting was always a messy business, especially if the insurgents had cannon, or even bazookas. . . . The Zocalo Chico would become an area of interdiction, and the road to the north—

"What did he say?"

Colonel Zeyd turned, frowning. For a moment he had completely forgotten about Hakim. The damned fellow could sit there like a piece of furniture.

"He told us more or less what we expected to hear," Zeyd said. "I foresee no difficulties."

"I am glad you feel optimistic," Hakim said. "But I would appreciate knowing exactly what the man said."

Colonel Zeyd kept his face impassive while he studied Hakim. The man had been in Rakka for less than twelve hours; he was a civilian, a special agent of some sort, traveling on high-priority orders from Baghdad. His presence was more than unnecessary; it came very close to being insulting.

"He said the usual sort of thing. He said what that sort of person always says. I will make my move in the morning."

"Not now?"

"Definitely not now. There is a procedure to be followed, a protocol to be observed. The reactions of the foreign newspapers must be considered, also the reactions of various foreign consulates. We do not behave here like dull-witted Nazi storm troopers, Hakim."

But you do, Hakim thought. You behave like storm troopers filled with anxiety. That is a contradiction you may someday have to pay for.

"Will you tell me your plans for the morning?" Hakim asked.

"Of course, of course, all in good time," Colonel Zeyd said. "I have one or two other matters to take care of first." He busied himself with a pile of papers.

Hakim lounged back in his chair, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Zeyd bored him. Most military men bored him with their jealousy and obtuseness, their childish need for the external trappings of dignity.

It was true that Zeyd seemed to have this particular matter well in hand. But did he, really? The Colonel seemed to be a good enough soldier; but he was evidently a poor politician. That augured badly for the resolution of a political situation.

Hakim knew that he could be wrong; his own particular weakness was oversubtlety. Perhaps everything would go as Zeyd expected, and Hakim's talents would be superfluous. Perhaps. . . . But it was nothing he would wager money on. The predictions of soldiers had an uncanny way of missing the mark.

He looked at his watch. Another four or five hours, during which time the pigheaded Colonel might deign to give him necessary information. Four or five hours might well see the end of it.

"Colonel," Hakim said, "may I use your telephone?"

Zeyd looked up, startled. "Who in God's name would you be calling?"

"The café," Hakim said. "I would like some coffee."

"Then use the phone, by all means," Colonel Zeyd said.

He could be generous about some things.

Chapter 6

The Fourth Day

Since spying can be classified as a profession, it necessarily has many features in common with other, more mundane professions. It is a way of life with its own jargon, discontents, internal rivalries, and intramural jokes. It is a line of work which combines a high degree of danger with an even higher degree of boredom. Out of this unstable and explosive compound a spy's more typical moments are made.

Dain experienced one of those ambiguous moments when he came downstairs in the morning. His hotel bill was already made out, and it was scrupulously correct. Dain considered that an infallible sign of trouble. He paid and tipped lavishly, casting his bread upon the waters, but not really expecting anything in return. A taxi was waiting outside, its door open and its engine turning over noisily. Dain watched the bellboys pile his luggage into the trunk.

It gave him a sensation of interminable recurrence. He had done all this before, had left other hotels in which the staff, lined up by the wide front steps, watched with holiday curiosity the inexorable progress of the condemned man.

It all felt wrong; but a spy must often learn to disregard his best intuitions. Therefore Dain stepped into the taxi, the hired hearse of the day, with its grinning, knowledgeable driver. He had it clearly now, the sensation of imminent danger; but he also had the faint corrosive boredom which accompanies repetition.

They turned away from the R'as Adan headland and descended swiftly on the corkscrew road into the city, and then past the jerry-built suburbs and onto the airport road. The driver was playing the radio: Rock 'n' roll from Station Oblivion, the voice of the Arabs and of everyone else, with the beat that drives you over the brink; (a little number for Ali and Abdullah and Salim and all the rest of the gang over at the Nepenthe Fig-Packers Association).

These moments, these clumsily foreshadowed taxi rides into

disaster, were absurd but unavoidable. To experience the imminence of one's own death numbly, due to the tedium of a repeated stimulation, might be an ultimate in inhumanity. To discount in advance and in ennui the significance of one's own impending destruction ought to rank as a new peak in alienation.

"That is the Bab-el-Misri," the driver said, pointing to a handsomely carved gate. "It is the only thing the Egyptians have ever done for us."

"Nice-looking gate," Dain said.

"Oh, they build well," the driver said grudgingly. "But they think too highly of themselves for what little they do."

"Mmmm," Dain said, remembering similar conversations in Athens, Istanbul, Kabul. But everyone said the same thing—even himself.

"And there just beyond the road is a grove of date palms, sir, from which many useful articles are fashioned."

Dain leaned back and closed his eyes. He could be considered drugged, since repetition is a more powerful soporific than any of the opiates. Like them, it strips events of their significance. But beyond any chemical narcosis, repetition is sheer brute quantity changing and bleaching the nature of the world by rendering meaning itself as meaningless. And even though Dain knew that he ought to act, the incantatory power of repetition held him as the taxi continued its noisy journey to the airport.

When he entered the terminal, two policemen moved up on either side of him, and a plainclothesman came up and asked, very politely, to see his passport. Dain handed it over, still dreamlike in the late-morning heat.

The plainclothesman—a heavy-eyed mesomorph—examined it, pretended to find something wrong, pretended to frown.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Pearson. You will have to come with me." He put the passport into his pocket.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"There is an irregularity."

"What kind of an irregularity?"

The plainclothesman frowned again, genuinely this time. His small stock of patience had been used up. "This way," he said, and the two policemen took Dain by the arms.

Offering no resistance, Dain was led through a door to the terminal parking lot. There, a police jeep was waiting.

"Where are you taking me?" Dain asked, continuing his part of the obligatory dialogue.

"To police headquarters."

"But I'll miss my plane."

"That may well be."

"Now, look here—"

The policemen pushed him into the jeep. Dain continued to protest, since it was part of his assumed character. The driver started up, and they drove back to town.

Not all the way back, however. When they turned a corner into the Aguila slum, they saw that a bullock cart had overturned in the road. The jeep driver braked sharply, sending a cloud of dust into the dead white sky. He got out, and with the aid of the two policemen tried to turn the cart onto its wheels.

A crowd gathered to watch as they sweated at the massive wooden wheels.

"One! Two! Three!" They heaved, and a little boy with white fungus patches on his shaven head ran past them, cheering, and flung something round as he ran.

It was a fragmentation grenade and it cut down the driver and the two policemen before they had time to take cover. It also cut down half a dozen people in the crowd.

Inside the jeep, Dain and the plainclothesman had avoided the blast. They sat up now, the plainclothesman tugging a heavy Browning automatic out of a shoulder holster. Cursing, he rested the barrel across his left forearm and took careful aim at the sprinting child. As he lined up his sights he reminded himself that his Browning threw slightly to the left. He knew that a spine shot was the only practical thing to try, but he had long wondered whether he could blow out somebody's kneecap at fifty yards and he was tempted to have a go at it.

Dain resolved the problem by chopping down on his wrist, spoiling the shot and breaking one or two carpals. The plainclothesman turned, trying to keep his grip on the Browning. Dain chopped again with the side of his hand, a blow delivered forcefully across the man's Adam's apple. The plainclothesman came unjointed and collapsed across the seat, gurgling and gasping for air.

Dain got out of the jeep and looked at the crowd. They didn't look overtly hostile, but they didn't look especially friendly either. This neighborhood seemed a good place to get out of in a hurry, and Dain wanted to do just that. But how? Riding off in the police jeep was not possible; the grenade had smashed the radiator and shredded the left front

tire. Walking, at this particular moment, seemed an invitation for further trouble; but he could hardly stand around waiting for a bus.

His problem was speedily resolved for him. A small rusted Fiat came screeching out of the city like a djinn appearing out of a sandstorm. It pulled to a stop beside him, and a young man's long, tanned, scraggly-bearded face peered at him from under a tattered kaffiyah.

"You are Dain?" the man asked brusquely.

Dain nodded.

"Then get in quickly, for the love of God! They sent me to get you, but they talked tactics until it was nearly too late, the ridiculous city-bred bastards!"

Dain got in, and the driver engaged the clutch with a violence that hinted at hatred of the machine. The little car slewed around and started back into town.

"Where are you taking me?" Dain asked.

"To a place where you will be safe, God willing."

"Who sent you?"

"If you don't know, then perhaps you shouldn't know. I am paid to drive, not to talk."

"Are you allowed to tell me your name?" Dain asked.

"Allowed?" The driver gave him a look of pure astonishment. "Before God, I do as I please and I say what I please and I care not what man *allows*. My name is Maiyidh Bith al Ashafi, and I am a man of the 'Awazim, of whom you must have heard."

"All men have heard of the 'Awazim," Dain said solemnly.

Maiyidh glanced at him suspiciously, but Dain's face was unreadable.

"Well," Maiyidh continued, "in this part of the world, not only the Sharif tribes are to be reckoned with, and the most notable among the others are the 'Awazim, and this I testify before God, even though the land-rich 'Anizah and the Shammar consider themselves to be men above all others."

Maiyidh Bith al Ashafi made a scornful gesture with both hands as he spoke, nearly sending the Fiat into a wagon loaded with melons. "Watch yourself!" He shouted at the crook-backed old melon salesman, and brought the Fiat under control with considerable nonchalance. Dain decided that Maiyidh could be no more than twenty-five or -six. His narrow features seemed set in an expression of permanent anger. His tendency to vehemence and self-dramatization were in keeping with his environment.

They had turned off the airport road into the Badyinde quarter of Rakka. They rushed past the Al Mattar natural well, which supplied nearly a quarter of the populace with drinking water and intestinal worms, and came into a tangle of streets near the ruined Turkish mosque. Now Dain could hear the wail of police sirens coming up on them rapidly. Maiyidh bared his teeth like a hydrophobic dog and shot the Fiat into an alley that appeared barely large enough to accommodate a donkey.

He got through, leaving a double smear of rust and a centimeter of steel smeared along the tight stone walls.

He turned proudly to Dain. "What do you think of that? Their jeeps are too fat to follow, they will have to circle around and come in by the main road."

"Clever idea," Dain said. "Have you used it often?"

"I just thought of it now. These Iraqi policemen probably thought it was impossible."

Dain had also thought it was impossible. He still wasn't sure it could be done even though they had done it.

They had come out onto a circular road, whose perimeter was the Yobu Ber—the Big Market, Rakka's main suq. They entered the crowded market at barely diminished speed, nearly mowed down a row of barbers' stalls, clipped off the awning of a slipper-maker, swung wide around a formidable group of camels, and pulled to a stop behind a red brick tannery.

"Well, we are here," Maiyidh said. "Get out, I must hide this car."

"Where am I supposed to go?" Dain asked.

"In the name of God!" Maiyidh shouted. "Since I have brought you straight to the back door of a tannery, you surely can't expect that I mean you to go to the bakery down the street!"

Dain looked at the long, low building. He didn't like it. He also didn't like Maiyidh, or Rakka, or Arabia, or the rest of the Middle East. The whole area got on his nerves. Everyone was always in a hurry, but they never seemed to think anything through or get anything done. Maybe it was the climate; it seemed ideal for nervous breakdowns.

"Go straight in, they're expecting you," Maiyidh said. "But for God's sake get out of my car and let me get away!"

Dain got out. "Thanks for the lift," he said.

"It was my pleasure," Maiyidh told him. "I was paid, of course, but I would have done it for nothing, for you, as a favor. May God's peace be with you!"

"And with you," Dain said.

Maiyidh drove away like a man pursued by furies. Dain walked slowly to the door of the tannery. He pushed the door, and it creaked open. Dain stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

The room was perhaps sixty feet long by twenty wide. A despondent gray light filtered in through high, barred windows. Dain could see the carcasses of a dozen or so sheep hanging head-downward, their rear legs tied to a ceiling beam. Green skins lay in a careless pile against one wall. Further back, a few cured goat hides were pegged out on the floor. Aside from the dead sheep and the goat hides, the tannery seemed deserted.

Dain wondered if Maiyidh had taken him to the wrong address; it would have been in keeping with the man's character, to lose track of so insignificant a matter. He took a few steps into the room, and called out softly, "Anybody home?"

He moved slowly into the room, past the pile of stinking green hides, past the bloodless white carcasses of the sheep. He took another two steps, and suddenly realized that one of those carcasses had seemed in peculiarly fine condition. . . .

Dain pivoted swiftly, assuming a modified karate stance, with left foot forward and right foot back, feet turned slightly inward and weight equally distributed, his arms bent and close to his body, his hands open. His impression of the man behind him was blurred, and he sensed rather than saw the half-completed downward swing of the man's club.

Dain's response was automatic, the result of endless hours of instruction and practice. Dain's left arm was rising as he completed his turn, and he snapped a block with all his strength against the arm descending with the club. His opponent recoiled, and was forced to turn slightly to the right by the force of Dain's block. Dain stepped forward following the movement. His right hand, tucked in firmly against his side, lashed straight out and upward in a *nukite*, a spear-hand with fingers stretched out and tight together, palm twisted down and thumb tucked under. Dain could feel that his strike was perfectly executed, a devastating riposte to the man's unguarded throat.

That moment of satisfaction nearly cost Dain his life, for the man with the club, twisting around frantically in a muscle-straining convulsion, managed to deflect Dain's blow off the side of his shoulder.

Off balance and wide open, Dain tried to recover, cursing

himself for not having struck at the larger target of his enemy's midriff. He had broken the cardinal rule of all combat, the first lesson that had been drilled into him: never to underestimate your opponent.

Fortunately for Dain, that rule applied equally to his opponent. Out of position and off balance, the man didn't allow himself the precious half-second to recover a balanced fighting stance. He jumped forward immediately, half feinting a swinging blow, and then stabbing a straight jab into Dain's belly with the two-inch butt of his club.

It was not a good attempt. Dain turned and avoided it easily, recovering his balance as he did so. His hands were now close to his waist and he raised his right leg and lashed out with the edge of his shoe, driving the side kick hard into the man's kidneys.

The man went down, dropping his club and striking his head against the floor. Taking no chances, Dain moved behind him, grabbed him by the hair and wrenched his head back. The man's hands moved feebly; Dain drove a murderous knife-hand chop to the man's neck.

"Enough!" the man cried; and Dain stopped the blow an inch from the man's carotid artery.

The man sat up slowly, experimentally, propping himself against the wall and trying to catch his breath. He felt his left side, which had caught the full impact of Dain's kick. He winced and said, "I believe you have fractured one or two of my ribs."

"That's possible," Dain admitted. "But more likely it's a simple bone bruise."

"Still, I think I should have a doctor examine it."

"You should, if you can. But as matters stand, it's by no means certain that you'll get the opportunity."

"Yes, I suppose there *is* that." The man looked up and saw Dain still in a fighting stance. "My dear fellow," he said, "I don't know what plans you have for me; but presumably we are to have a little talk first?"

Dain nodded. "You're going to talk, and I'm going to listen."

"Precisely. But in that case, *must* you stand over me like that? I mean to say, I can barely move my side where you kicked me; and your first blow, though not quite on target, seems to have paralyzed my right arm. Under the circumstances, I think perhaps you can stand easy, or even sit down and have a smoke."

"Lean forward and grab your ankles," Dain ordered. The

man did so, grimacing with pain. Dain searched him quickly for a gun or knife, and found none.

"All right, you can lean back now," Dain said. He also sat down and lighted a cigarette. "Now, who are you?"

"I am Jabir abu Ibrahim."

"Where are you from?"

"I was born in Rabat, but Cairo is my home."

"You're a long way from home, Jabir abu Ibrahim."

"I am indeed; but less far than you, Mr. Dain."

The two men studied each other in silence for a while. Dain was puzzled. Jabir had neither the appearance nor the manner of a thug. He was tall and thin, with a finely shaped head and good features. It was evident that he was a city man, and probably well off; his skin was light, untanned by exposure to wind and sun, and his long, delicate hands bore no marks of manual labor. He wore a gray tropical-weight suit of Italian cut, considerably soiled now. He was clean-shaven in a land where men swore by their beards. He was affable and entirely at his ease, a pleasingly ironic companion for an evening's chat in a cocktail lounge rather than on the bloodstained floor of a tannery.

"Who hired you to kill me?" Dain asked. "Or were you free-lancing for yourself?"

"Hardly that," Jabir said. "As for my employers—or perhaps we could say my friends—it would hardly be discreet of me to mention names."

"That's quite true," Dain said. "But do you think that your discretion is worth a broken neck?"

"I can hardly believe it will come to that," Jabir said, with a disarming smile. "Consider the situation: I am a beaten and disabled man, helpless, entirely at your mercy. You are an American, and you display the national tendency toward honor and fair play."

"Do I really display all that?" Dain asked.

Jabir nodded emphatically. "The bent of your character is unmistakable; you might have killed me in the heat of battle, had it come to that. But now that the fight is over, are you going to murder in cold blood? Don't be ridiculous, my friend! You are not like some barbaric Turk or Russian executioner, and you cannot make me think that you are."

"It's an interesting assessment," Dain said. "Would you stake your life on it?"

"I most assuredly would."

"Then you lose," Dain said. He yanked Jabir away from the

wall and pushed him face-down on the floor. Then, taking a firm two-handed grip around Jabir's forehead, he planted a knee in the small of his back and wrenched hard.

"Stop, in God's name," Jabir screamed.

Dain stopped. "I beg your pardon. Did you wish to say a prayer?"

Jabir said shakily, "You were going to kill me. You were actually going to kill me."

"I still am," Dain told him. "Say your prayer or whatever it is you want to say. I'll give you three seconds."

Jabir stared at him in disbelief. Dain studied his watch, and then his hands moved around Jabir's forehead.

"Stop!" Jabir cried. "I'll tell you everything!"

"As you wish," Dain said. "But I would not have you act against your conscience."

"My life is my conscience. Let me sit up and give me a cigarette, please."

"Start talking," Dain said. "Who hired you?"

"I was not hired. I agreed to do it for a cause in which I believe."

"What cause? Who told you to get me?"

"The cause is Rakkan independence. The man who desired your death is Sayyid Aziz Aouad Ben Alyma. Now may I sit up and have a cigarette?"

"Go ahead," Dain said. He had some thinking to do. Ben Alyma was his contact man in Rakka, and the most prominent figure in the local resistance. The Committee had specifically sent him to Ben Alyma. Hassan, the geologist who had stumbled across the Iraqi brigade, had been Alyma's man, and had given Dain the vital information on Ben Alyma's own instructions.

Now Ben Alyma wanted Dain killed—according to Jabir. It made no sense.

"A child could invent a better story than that," Dain decided.

"I am well aware of that," Jabir said sadly. "But I didn't quite dare invent something on the spur of the moment. It seemed less risky to tell the truth, however implausible it might be."

"Perhaps it seemed better to tell an implausible lie rather than a plausible one."

"I swear upon my honor that I told the truth! I testify before God that this is what happened."

Dain sat, heavy and somber, thinking. The seconds passed. Jabir finished his cigarette and asked, "Were you really going to kill me?"

"I still might. You know that I was sent here to aid in the Rakkan independence movement?"

Jabir nodded.

"Then why would Ben Alyma want to kill me?"

Jabir smiled mournfully. "Many are sent, but their motives can only be guessed at. In your case, it was only discovered late last night that you were not what we had expected."

"No? What was I, then?"

"An enemy. We learned that you were working for the Iraqis."

Dain looked up, startled. "What bazaar did you hear *that* story in?"

"As it happens, our information came directly from the Central Committee in Athens."

"Which member of the Committee?"

"Raoudi."

"Then Raoudi is mistaken, or he is a traitor to your cause."

"Raoudi has spent twenty years working for Rakkan independence. Also, he does not make mistakes, certainly not when they involve the life of an official American operative, with all that implies in possible international repercussions."

"To hell with that, I'm telling you he's wrong, or lying. Somebody's doing a high-class snow-job around here. Look, if I were the traitor you think I am, why didn't I simply turn my information over to the Iraqis after I got it from Hassan?"

"Because that would have spoiled the Iraqi counterplan. They knew that Rakka was ready to revolt, and they suspected it would be soon; hence the armored brigade stationed nearby. But they didn't know *when*. It was vital for them to learn the exact date, and to allow the uprising to begin as if they knew nothing about it. An armored brigade is expensive to operate, and they have need of it elsewhere as soon as possible. In view of the situation, they would avoid any contact with you as long as you were in Rakkan territory."

"But on the other hand," Dain pointed out, "they couldn't just let me leave and deliver my message to the Committee. If I got word back to Raoudi or Bekr, the revolt would be postponed for as long as the brigade was still in the area."

"Yes, of course, if you are with us. But assuming that you are in Iraqi employ, then your course is simple. You reach the

Committee within the allotted time and tell them that all is well, there are no Iraqi troops in the area, the revolt can proceed as planned."

"If that was the plan, then why did the Iraqi cops grab me at the airport and take me back into Rakka?"

"Window dressing, designed to make you look good. You would have been released in a few hours, perhaps deported. It would have lent a certain verisimilitude to the scheme."

"And Raoudi figured this all out in the space of an hour or two last night, on the basis of God knows what information, and instantly sent word to have me killed. . . . Really, you people are a little too much."

"We do tend to be impetuous," Jabir admitted, "and we have a fatal love of overcomplication. I am truly beginning to wonder, Mr. Dain, if there might not have been a misunderstanding somewhere along the line."

Dain stood up and kicked disgustedly at a sheepskin. "I'm beginning to wonder if there's been anything *but* misunderstandings, slipups, crossed signals, and general confusion anywhere along the line. This whole damned affair—"

He stopped abruptly. Police sirens had begun suddenly, three of them, closing rapidly on the tannery.

"Now we really do have a situation," Jabir said. "Or rather I do."

"You damned fool, don't you realize yet that I'm in this over my head? If I stick around with the Rakkans, one of you patriots will stick a knife in my ribs at the first opportunity. If the Iraqis take me, it'll probably be a damned sight unpleasanter."

Jabir got to his feet stiffly. He said, "Dain, I believe you. It could mean my life if I'm wrong, but I trust you. Stay with us, we'll straighten out whatever misunderstanding has occurred, and you will take your message to the Committee."

"All right," Dain said slowly, "I guess maybe I trust you too, though I don't know why I should."

"It's settled then," Jabir said, gripping him warmly by the forearm.

"That's just great,' Dain said. "Now, how do you propose we get ourselves out of here?"

They could hear one jeep pulling to a stop in front of the tannery. The other two sounded no more than fifty yards away.

"Yes," Jabir said, his face losing animation. "Escape is indeed our most pressing problem. . . . We seem to be surrounded. Might you perhaps happen to have any good ideas, Mr. Dain?"

Chapter 7

Jabir hurried over and locked the tannery door.

"I don't suppose you'd happen to have a gun on you?" Dain asked.

"I'm afraid not," Jabir said. "Stick fighting is more my métier."

"So I noticed."

"You saw nothing, nothing at all," Jabir assured him. "Please do not judge my skills by the pitiable exhibition I made in my fight with you. I thought it would be simplest to just knock you over the head—on the point of the mastoid behind the left ear, to be exact. I never expected you to be trained in—karate, was it?"

"More or less," Dain said. "You damned near got me anyhow."

"Perhaps we could have a re-match sometime," Jabir said thoughtfully. "It would be interesting. . . . But for the present, might you by any chance have a gun on your person?"

"I'm afraid not," Dain said.

"No? I thought American special agents always carried an assortment of guns and other lethal devices."

"Lethal devices have to be small enough to pass through an unfriendly customs check," Dain said. "That rules out hardware. I thought I'd get a chance to pick up something locally. Not that a pistol would do us much good at the moment."

There was a loud hammering on the tannery door. An angry voice with a heavy Baghdadi accent demanded to be allowed inside instantly. It further announced that any attempt at resistance would be met by instant and fatal retaliation.

"They use 9-mm Luger machine pistols around here," Jabir commented. "They love to operate them on automatic fire. Do you suppose we might escape over the roof tops?"

"Roof top," Dain corrected. "As far as I remember, this building isn't connected to any other. We're not in the Casbah, you know."

"Open, open instantly!" the Baghdadi policeman shouted. His order was followed by the heavy thumps of at least three men throwing themselves against the door.

"What happens if we give ourselves up?" Dain asked.

"They have a little courtyard behind the Commandant's office where they execute people like us after extracting what they can in the way of information."

"Well then," Dain said, "since we have no feasible choices, we'll just have to try something unfeasible. If you're game for it, I suggest that we—"

At that moment ten square feet of wall vanished in a sudden explosion, and a cloud of red brick dust filled the room.

"Grenades!" Jabir shouted.

"That was no grenade," Dain said. "Look!"

The dust had settled enough to let them see the battered front end of a truck jammed halfway through the wall. A voice shouted at them, "Come, you two! Must I sit here all day while you gape?"

It was Maiyidh Bith al Ashafi, coming to save Dain for the second time within the hour. His features were set in their habitual expression of anger. But he was unable to restrain a little smile of pleasure and self-appreciation as Dain and Jabir scrambled in beside him; after all, he had just driven a truck through a brick wall.

Machine-pistol fire converged on the truck as Maiyidh ground into reverse and backed out. The windshield exploded into fragments; Maiyidh spit glass, slammed the brakes on and shifted into low. Bullets sounded like a hailstorm as they hammered through the sides of the truck. Luckily, the policemen hadn't thought yet about shooting out the tires or the engine; they were expressing rage and resentment against the truck. They seemed to be trying to bring it down as though it were a rogue elephant.

"Did you see me shatter that brick wall?" Maiyidh asked proudly. "Surely no man living has dared such a feat! Yet I did this thing in order to save you, Dain, and because nothing is impossible to an 'Awazim."

"Two times thus far you have saved my life," Dain said formally. "Nothing I can say is sufficient to show my gratitude, and no deed will ever be sufficient for me to repay my debt to you."

"It is nothing at all," Maiyidh said grandly. "Please do not even consider it."

"Couldn't we go a little faster?" Jabir asked mildly.

The heavy truck lumbered across the suq like a pregnant water buffalo; the police jeeps circled around it like enraged hornets. It was like a stagecoach of the old West being pursued by hostile Indians. The main difference was that, instead of an open prairie, the chase was across a crowded market filled with screaming men and women, eight or ten flimsy buildings, and fifty or more open-air stalls.

"Alas," Maiyidh said, "this particular machine was not constructed for racing. Still, it has certain advantages."

Dain was unable to see what the advantages were. He could hear a police officer screaming at his men, trying to organize them. With the jeeps flanking them, they raced across the center of the market, upsetting trays of copper cups and piles of red and yellow sweetmeats. They bounced over a display of saddles, squashed through a mound of watermelons, and stampeded three camels and several dozen donkeys. One of the jeeps had to cut sharply to avoid running down a horse; he passed instead through a cotton merchant's tent and emerged trailing streamers of multicolored cloth. The driver had to stop and unwind himself.

"Score one for us," Maiyidh said, as though he had worked out that trick in advance.

A jeep with a fat police captain in it raced alongside them and poured bullets into the cab. Dain and Jabir ducked down out of sight. Maiyidh also ducked down below the level of the windows, and continued to drive the truck at its maximum speed of forty miles an hour.

"You will kill us all!" Jabir said.

"Not I," Maiyidh told him. "I am able to see my way through the bullet holes."

The police wasted a few hundred rounds before they realized that their strategy was not succeeding. Then the Captain shouted more orders and his jeep sped on ahead. A second jeep remained on the truck's right flank, and the third, having succeeded in unwinding the driver, was now far in the rear.

Jabir sniffed. "We've been hit in the gas tank."

"Better there than somewhere else," Maiyidh told him.

They came around a dry cistern, passed the swordmaker's bazaar, and turned down an alley formed by a double row of warehouses. The market ended thirty yards in front of them, opening into the broad Shari Marasina. But the Captain's jeep had gotten there first. Quickly it slewed around, forming a block across the road.

"Not so good," Jabir said. "Still, if one of those warehouses is unlocked, we could get out and make a run for it. . . ."

Maiyidh was not listening. Dain had seen that expression on his face before; teeth bared, eyes bulging, no evidence of sanity in his contorted face, he stamped the accelerator to the floor and headed directly at the jeep.

There was no time for Dain or Jabir to protest. Nor was there a need. The Captain and his soldiers hadn't yet had time to get out of their jeep. When they saw the battered truck bearing down on them with murderous (or perhaps suicidal) determination, they panicked.

The Captain screamed unnecessary orders. The driver slammed into gear and the jeep shot forward and piled into a lamppost. The truck emerged onto the Shari Marasina and turned right past the Qaytbay mosque into the Shari Duhdeira.

"Roadblocks are only effective," Maiyidh said sententiously, "when one is not sitting *in* them."

"Very true," Dain said. "But now, what about the other two jeeps?"

"Are they close behind?" Maiyidh asked.

Jabir glanced out the window. "About fifty yards away and gaining fast."

"Then I shall take care of them shortly," Maiyidh said, and turned hard left, into the narrow Shari Khalifa.

"We cannot have much gasoline left," Jabir warned.

"I do not require much gasoline," Maiyidh said grandly. "Wait, and all shall be revealed to you."

Megalomania is an unpleasant trait at best. In its more extreme forms, it is a sure road to sudden death. Maiyidh had, up to this point, repeatedly done the impossible. But there always comes a time when the impossible really proves impossible. Had that time come now?

Dain didn't know, and also found that he didn't care much. For the first time in his life he had gained an understanding of the doctrine of kismet. What is written is written, and our destinies are graven on stone long before our birth. Protest is useless, anxiety is blasphemy. In this mood Dain leaned back and made a serious attempt to enjoy the ride. It had, at least, the advantage of being a very scenic route.

Chapter 8

The truck fled like a wounded bear, with two jeeps snapping at its heels like wolves. Maiyidh turned into the Shari Taht er-Rab' and swung his truck back and forth to keep the jeeps behind him. He was muttering to himself and pounding on the steering wheel. Jabir sat with a furrowed brow, chewing his lower lip. Dain lay back and contemplated how transitory a thing is existence; it seemed a very good thing to contemplate at the moment.

Maiyidh turned again, passed through the Bab Darb el-Labban, shifted into second and turned up the Shari Tabbana, toward the highest part of town. Halfway up, he cut abruptly into the steep Shari Bab el-Wazir. This street was little more than a lane. The truck filled it completely, leaving perhaps a foot of clearance on either side.

The street continued to rise at an angle approaching forty degrees, and Maiyidh shifted into low, continuing for another fifty feet while the engine screamed its protest. Then he turned to his passengers.

"Do you see that doorway on the right, half open, with an oval top? We will leave the truck and go there."

"What about the police?" Jabir wanted to know.

"They will soon have other matters on their minds," Maiyidh answered with a grin. He shifted into neutral, swung open his door, and ran for the doorway. Dain and Jabir followed.

It came to pass even as the grandiloquent 'Azmi had predicted. The truck acted as a roadblock. That was bad enough. But the roadblock, left in neutral, began slowly and ponderously to roll back down the hill, threatening to crush the jeeps.

The policemen kept their heads, after a fashion. Without time or space in which to turn around, they went into reverse and retreated before the behemoth. Driving backwards at high speed down a steep narrow street is no mean feat, and one of the drivers wasn't up to it. He lost control, swerved dangerously close to the as-Silahdar mosque, overcompensated and piled

up against a small red granite building done in eighteenth-century Ottoman style.

The second driver, better coordinated, made it all the way down to the intersection of Shari Tabbana. There he had the bad luck to collide with a Chrysler Imperial belonging to the Sheikh Jabir bin Mubarak, who had come down from Kuwait for a visit. The car and jeep were in turn struck by a venerable Buick, used as a provisions carrier between Rakka and the new oil field near Minaqish, and driven by the half-blind old Muhammad ibn Shennut of the low-caste Ruwala Salubba.

Maiyidh's truck plowed obliquely into this mass of vehicles, catching the Chrysler full-on and striking the jeep a glancing blow that snapped its front axle.

The old Buick—sole source of wealth for the Rakkan branch of the Ruwala Salubba—escaped with nothing worse than a crumpled fender. For this miracle, old Shennut immediately prostrated himself in the street and gave thanks to Him from whom all blessings flow.

Crowds gathered, curses flowed. Maiyidh stood in the doorway cheering until Dain and Jabir were finally able to drag him inside.

Maiyidh reluctantly closed the door behind him and latched it with an iron bar. He led them through the passageway, which separated two decrepit houses, and into a miniature courtyard. Here he selected another alley, so strait that they had to go through it sideways, past six or eight closed doors. Near the end of the alley, Maiyidh knocked on one of the doors.

A tiny Judas window opened and a brown eye stared at them through a black iron mesh. Then the bolts clashed and the doorkeeper pushed open the massive oak door; he bolted it again when they were inside.

"Quickly," Maiyidh said, when the procedure was through, "lead us to your master."

"Not I," said the doorkeeper. "My orders are to remain at the door."

"Then tell the Galla girl to bring us."

"Hasinah is out shopping."

"Then what about the other *mu'alid?*"

"Abdel has been coughing for three days and is taken to his bed with *al khabith*. Ali Bekr is helping Hasinah to shop, and Mas'ud the cook is in the kitchen cooking and will let no man disturb him. You can surely find your own way by this time, Bedouin?"

"Of course I can find my way!" Maiyidh said hotly. "But we should be announced!"

"Make your complaints to the master," the doorkeeper said, and seated himself firmly on the boab beside the door.

Maiyidh cursed him, and then led Dain and Jabir down the curved passageway. Then he stopped. "It is thoroughly improper," Maiyidh explained. "After all, even though I am not rich, I *am* a pure-blooded 'Azmi, and therefore it is insulting to me and to all my people if I am not respectfully announced."

"I quite understand your feelings," Dain said wearily. "You're perfectly right, of course; but can't we just get on with it?"

"Of course," Maiyidh said. "I just wanted you to understand my position, and to know that this is yet another thing that I do out of friendship for you."

Muttering to himself, Maiyidh led them across an oblong court with a flower bed and an acacia tree, into a small, sparsely furnished room.

"This is the takhtabush," Maiyidh said. "It is the room where unimportant people are interviewed. This is not for us, of course."

He led the way again through a beaded opening. But now he seemed less sure of himself. The walls and corridors of the house seemed to oppress him. He compressed his lips and gripped the wooden handle of his *khusa*, the knife he carried desert-fashion in the front of his sash. Then he noticed Dain looking at him, and he said, "I would not have you believe, Dain, that I fear anything except God himself. But the fact is that we, the true *Arab al 'Ariba*, are men of open desert and sky, and we find ourselves ill at ease in cities, and in dwelling places with fixed walls, which are known to retain disease and bad air."

Jabir started to snicker, but changed it into a cough. Maiyihd decided not to notice it, and led them forward again, into a larger, somewhat better-furnished room.

"This is the *qa'a*," Maiyidh stated. "This is the important room where we shall discuss our business with the master."

"Where is the master?" Jabir asked.

"He should be here to greet us," Maiyidh growled. "His absence is an insult past my endurance, as it should be past yours. By God, first no servant to lead us in, and then no man to greet us! Somebody's blood will pay for this!"

The *qa'a* was a long, high-ceilinged room with divans at either end resting upon raised platforms. There was a gray

marble stand beside one divan, and an inlaid wooden box in front of the other. Upon the box there were two brass candlestands, a gray metal incense burner, and an ashtray from Chicago's Gaslight Club. There were Isfahani rugs on the floor and on two of the walls. Cupboards were set into the entire length of another wall. A soft light entered the room through latticed windows, but the air was heavy, humid, and lifeless.

Just then Aziz Aouad ben Alyma hurried into the room. The heavy-set merchant was lavish enough in his apologies to satisfy even the touchy Maiyidh. Ben Alyma had been talking to the police at the front door when Dain and his party had come in through the side door. He had kept his servants on their normal rounds in order not to arouse Iraqi suspicion. It had all been unavoidable, and all quite necessary for their safety. Yet despite that, he did not really expect them to forgive his breach of the laws of hospitality.

Maiyidh excused him grandly, and Jabir with a smile. They sat together on one of the divans, and Ali Bekr—returned from shopping—served them coffee, and candy imported from Fortnum & Mason's.

When the servant had left the room, Ben Alyma leaned forward and said to Dain, "I must apologize again, Mr. Dain, for attempting to have you killed. I am terribly ashamed and sorry—"

Dain broke in, hoping to cut short a half-hour or so of breast-beating. "Have you figured out yet what went wrong?"

"Well, perhaps you already know," Ben Alyma said, "that I received word from Raoudi late last night to kill you."

"How did he get in touch with you?" Dain asked. "I thought that communication between you and the Committee is nearly impossible."

"It can be done if one takes long enough at it," Ben Alyma said. "In this case, I received my information from an Awamir tribesman, an Omani Bedouin who had ridden his mare half to death to bring his message through."

"Did he come alone?" Jabir asked.

"Alone and unprotected, with nothing but his rifle and the speed of his mare to aid him on the dangerous ride up the coast. But she was an excellent-looking mare, a black with a lucky circle on her forehead, and possessing also a near-fore white."

"A bay is always better than a black," Maiyidh said promptly.

"Not better than a black with a lucky circle on her forehead *and* a white stocking."

"The Prophet's first mare was black," Jabir commented, "and she had white on her off-fore, and a white star on her forehead, and she was unsurpassed in battle."

"Anyhow," Dain said, "this man arrived—"

"Yes, the Awamir tribesman," Ben Alyma continued. "He had ridden hard and taken great risks, and he carried Raoudi's own signet ring to prove himself. He gave me Raoudi's message: that the American Stephen Dain was a traitor to Rakka and a spy for the Iraqis; that he must be killed at once; and that this information came from a high Saudi official who had long been helpful to the Rakkan cause, and whose honor could not be doubted. Further, he told me delay would fatally endanger our entire cause."

"That's plain enough, after a fashion," Dain said. "So you sent Jabir to do the job. But why, after that, did you change your mind and send Maiyidh to pull me out?"

"After the Awamiri gave his message," Ben Alyma said, "I wasted no time. As you say, I dispatched Jabir. Then I turned to offer my guest hospitality. But he would not stay, since he felt it would bring danger upon my house. I offered him a fresh animal, but he said he trusted only Ayissa, his own mare. He said he would take shelter in the desert with the Bani Khalid, among whom he had a friend. And then he rode off."

"So?" Dain asked. "It doesn't sound entirely unreasonable.'

"Not entirely; just a *little* unreasonable. I stood and watched him go, and my heart was heavy; something about that messenger bothered me, but I didn't know what it was."

"So what did you figure it was, finally?" Dain asked.

"I thought long and hard," Ben Alyma said, "but I couldn't put my finger on it. He had been a rude, rough-looking fellow, and a man I would not care to have behind me on a dark night. But still, he had had Raoudi's signet ring, which I know as well as I know the rings on my own hand. And he had the right to seek his own protection."

"Perhaps you distrusted him because he was from the south," Maiyidh suggested. "Personally, I have no use for those barbarous Omani tribes, not the Awamir nor the Ghafiri nor any of the others."

"They are as good a sort of men as any other," Ben Alyma said. "No, it was not that. I thought and I thought, and then it came to me! It was his horse."

"But what was wrong with his horse?" Jabir asked. "You said it seemed excellent."

"Yes, and I still stand by that judgment."

"Was it perhaps not blowing and sweating, like a horse that has been ridden long and hard?" Maiyidh asked.

"It had been ridden nearly into the ground," Ben Alyma said. "It looked barely capable of taking him to the camping grounds of the Bani Khalid."

"Then what was it about the horse?" Dain asked.

"It was her nose," Ben Alyma said.

"Her nose!" cried Jabir.

"What was wrong with her nose?" asked Maiyidh.

"Nothing whatsoever," Ben Alyma said blandly. "It was a fine, large, well-formed nose—a Roman nose, I think you would call it, Mr. Dain. Taken all in all, it was a great and magnificent nose, a superb and unmistakable feature."

Maiyidh had caught on now and was grinning broadly. Jabir, city-bred and with little more than a literary knowledge of the Prophet's first three horses, was confused but was beginning to see a glimmer of light. Dain, who knew nothing about horses and cared less, was bored, but knew better than to interrupt his host's story.

"And she was a thoroughbred?" Jabir asked, feeling his way.

"So I would say," Ben Alyma said. "Now, I have no more than a casual interest in horseflesh, and my knowledge, accordingly, is exceedingly small. But even I could not help but notice that this mare had great nostrils and long ears, and a wide forehead and powerful quarters, and a long neck with an unusual but graceful curve to it. Any man would have seen that much, and a horse-fancier would have seen much more. Does it come to you now, Jabir?"

"Only in a general sort of way," Jabir said. "But I believe that you must have recognized the breed."

"Recognized it!" Maiyidh burst out. "The horse tells more than that, you poor unfortunate city-dweller. What Sayyid Ben Alyma saw. . . . But forgive me, it is for you to tell, Ben Alyma."

"Well then," Ben Alyma continued, "I saw that the beast was thoroughbred, and was from one of the five great strains of Arabia. Very well, but which type was this? Kuhailan, obviously. But what type of Kuhailan? Ordinarily, I might not know. But in this case the beast had certain unmistakable points—most prominent of which was that superb Roman nose. The mare was accordingly of the well-known Shawaf

breed. And realizing this, and its implications, I knew that the messenger must be a fraud, and accordingly I dispatched Maiyidh."

"I still don't get it," Dain said.

"Perhaps Maiyidh would be good enough to explain the rest," Ben Alyma said. "My throat seems to have grown somewhat dry."

"It's clear enough if you know the history of the breed," Maiyidh said. "You see, the Sheikhs of Bahrein used to maintain and breed the Shawafi, to their prestige, until after the time of the disturbances of 1930, which left them nearly bankrupt. Accordingly, they sold their entire herd, as well as other possessions, to Faisal al Duwish, Sheikh of all the Mutair, he who had so greatly assisted Sa'ud in the winning of his kingdom. But later there was a falling out, and the king imprisoned Faisal al Duwish, who died in Riyadh, some say of poison; and Sa'ud took the Shawaf horses—as well as the famous Shuruf camels—and for this the Mutair have never forgiven him, even though they managed to recover the camels at a later date. But as for the horses, some years later Sa'ud gave the horses to the northern 'Anizah in order to hold their loyalty, but this was looked upon angrily by the Mutair, and also by the Shammar, who are the hereditary enemies of the 'Anizah, and for a time it seemed that war might come. So there was a little shooting and a great deal of talking, and Sa'ud distributed threats and gifts, and the 'Anizah were prevailed upon to sell the herd to the Rubiah in Iraq. Thus the horses were out of the country, and no one had lost honor—or perhaps everyone had; and there the matter seemed closed once and for all. Is that your understanding of the matter, Ben Alyma?"

"That is how I remember the matter," Ben Alyma said. "And remembering, I knew that some treachery was afoot, since no one sells a thoroughbred Shawaf mare with lucky markings out of the tribe; and the horse could not have been gotten by raiding, since Oman and the Rubiah lands in Iraq are more than a thousand miles apart. Do you see the conclusion, Dain?"

Dain nodded. "So the man was probably a Rubiah from Iraq rather than an Awamir from Oman."

"Precisely!" said Ben Alyma. "And it means that he rode from the north rather than the south, and thought that a stupid merchant wouldn't even know the breed of his horse."

"So we can assume that he was sent by the Iraqi authorities

in order to trick us here. . . . But in that case, how did they get Raoudi's signet ring?"

"That I do not know," Ben Alyma confessed. "But I *do* know that it would be easier to make a counterfeit ring, or even to steal the actual ring from Raoudi's hand, than to take a Shawaf mare from the Rubiah of Iraq."

Maiyidh nodded his vehement agreement to this, muttering, "By God, it is the truth!"

"It's really all quite fascinating," Dain said, "but don't you think we should make some arrangements for getting me out of Rakka and back to the Committee?"

"The arrangements have been already made," Ben Alyma said. "You will leave as soon as the moon is down, in less than two hours. But it will not be the speedy airplane ride we had hoped for, Mr. Dain."

"How am I to go?" Dain asked.

"Maiyidh and some of his tribesmen will escort you overland," Ben Alyma said. "It will be a little slower than the plane, of course; a day or so to Safaniyah, and then perhaps another day or so, or perhaps a little longer, to Jubail, God willing, and then to Qatif where a boat and car will be waiting; and so to Qatar—God willing."

"The Committee expects me within eight days," Dain reminded Ben Alyma.

"And they shall have you in five days, God willing."

"Should we expect any unusual difficulties on the way?"

"Unusual? No, nothing *unusual*, perhaps, though the future is unreadable to men, and particularly men who must make a long journey." Ben Alyma rose slowly to his feet. "But now, my friends, you must rest. The servant will bring dinner, and I will go now and make sure that arrangements are as we planned."

He left the room. Maiyidh immediately lay down on a divan, sighed luxuriously, and went to sleep. Dain and Jabir looked at each other, and Jabir shrugged his shoulders, gave a sigh of resignation, and settled down for a nap.

It seemed like a pretty good idea. Dain leaned back and closed his eyes, and was asleep almost at once.

The servant awoke them an hour later. Ali Bekr brought them a dinner of stringy roasted mutton, rice drenched in clarified butter, and dates. He told them that Sayyid Ben Alyma would come to them soon, and left. Dain and Jabir

ate without comment, but Maiyidh declared it the best dinner he had been served in two years.

Nearly an hour passed after they had finished the last of their coffee, and Maiyidh began to fidget. But Ben Alyma returned at last, full of apologies for keeping them so long, and told them that everything was ready.

"Now we must hurry," Ben Alyma said. "Jabir, Mr. Dain, kindly change into this clothing and leave all your garments here with me."

He opened a cupboard and gave each of them the outfit of an insolvent Bedouin: a soiled cotton smock and loose trousers, tattered woolen cloak, and the inevitable khafiyah with an agal of black rope to hold it in place.

"Yes, you look enough like an Arab, I think," Ben Alyma said, when Dain had finished changing. "But of course, Arabs look like anyone at all. . . . Your shoes are not authentic, but you had better keep them. If the police examine you that closely, you are done for anyhow. And wait—I had almost forgotten!"

He rushed to another cupboard and hurried back with two curved knives, similar to the khusa worn by Maiyidh. Then he stepped back to study the effect.

"Yes, I think that will do," Ben Alyma said. "Now, quickly, you must follow Maiyidh away from here."

"What about some real weapons?" Jabir asked, looking at the knife with distaste.

"I have never owned even the smallest of guns," Ben Alyma said. "I am only a merchant and a politician, may God have mercy upon me. . . . Besides, not even the Bedouins are allowed to carry their rifles into the residential part of the city. But Maiyidh and his friends will supply you with arms as soon as possible. So go now, hurry, and I pray that God may grant you a speedy and successful journey."

They left the house by the same side entrance through which they had entered, and heard the bolts clash as the doorkeeper locked up behind them. "Pull the hoods of those cloaks over your heads," Maiyidh told them, and moved swiftly down the alley.

They went through numerous twists and turns, with Maiyidh guiding them surely through the tangle of back-street alleys. After about ten minutes, four hooded figures came out of a doorway and fell into step with them. They were Bedu, as far as Dain was able to tell, and not a word was spoken for the next twenty minutes.

They reached the outskirts of the town. Behind them, a few faint lights glowed on the silent streets. Ahead of them was the gray darkness of the desert, faintly illuminated by starlight. Dain could make out, perhaps fifty yards away, a black tangle against the gray background. As they came closer, the tangle resolved itself into a group of men and camels.

"These are mere townsmen," Maiyidh said. "But good riders all the same. Now you will see what life is like for the *Arab al 'ariba*."

"That should be interesting," Jabir said to Dain, in a very doubtful voice.

"Probably," Dain said. "And probably quite unpleasant also."

Jabir nodded gloomily, and he and Dain moved forward to join the group.

Chapter 9

Learning to ride a camel shouldn't be too difficult, Dain felt; just as in the initial stages of any new technique, one must be firm yet adaptable; also open-minded, and capable of accepting one's mistakes with humor. It was in this spirit that he walked boldly up to the kneeling beast which Maiyidh pointed to, and mounted without hesitation.

Before he was firmly set in the sheepskin-lined wooden saddle, and while he was groping hopefully for the headrope, and hopelessly for the nonexistent stirrups, the camel grunted, shuddered, groaned, and rose to her feet like a series of minor earthquakes, throwing Dain hard against the pommel.

Dain did not find that particularly amusing. But immediately afterwards he discovered something else: that camel-riding required one to be something of a psychologist, if not of camels, then certainly of oneself. For the camel immediately arched and twisted her neck, which seemed as long and flexible as a medium-sized python, turned her head completely around, and stared forcefully into Dain's eyes from a distance of about six inches.

It was like being studied by a prehistoric monster of dubious intentions—an experience both uncanny and unpleasant. The camel's stare was belligerent, disputatious, grievance-filled, and it hinted that a moment of violent truth would come in the near future.

Dain stared back, trying to convey the idea that the camel had better not try any funny stuff with *him*. He located the headrope, and someone handed him a rifle and a bandolier of ammunition, and someone else gave him a camel-prod.

Dain prodded. His camel ignored it completely and went on staring. Dain wished he felt more confidence; but lacking it, he knew that he had at least to give the appearance of confidence, so he slapped the camel sharply across the ribs and said, "*Move*, you ugly snake-headed bastard."

The camel simply continued to stare at him unpleas-

antly mostly because she lived habitually in a state of sullen animosity, but also because this was the first time she had ever been ridden by an American secret agent, and he smelled wrong.

Dain contemplated whacking her between the eyes or across her ugly down-turned snout. Fortunately for both of them, it was unnecessary. Someone at the front of the group gave an order, and the camels started to move. When the other camels moved, Dain's beast gave him one final look just to show that she didn't give a damn. Then she twisted her neck to the front and followed the others, just as if she had planned it that way all along.

There was no conversation. The party, strung out in single file, moved at a brisk trot. Within an hour, Dain learned another fact about riding camels: that one really ought to be double-jointed in order to maintain the local riding style. Failing that, and with no stirrups in which to put his feet, Dain grimly hung on to the headrope and the pommel, folded and unfolded his legs while working hard not to fall off, and wondered if this sort of thing could bring on arthritis.

They continued steadily until dawn. Then a halt was called, the riders dismounted and prayed, and began brewing coffee. Dain slid cautiously off his camel and tried out his legs. They seemed all right except for his knees, which felt as though they had been sprung out of joint. His only meager satisfaction was the sight of Jabir, moving like a man who has been kicked by a mule.

Dain immediately straightened up when Jabir hobbled over. "What's the matter?" he asked innocently. "Out of practice?"

"My friend," Jabir said, "I have never before ridden a camel, or any other beast, for that matter. Most Arabs live in cities, you know, and their typical means of conveyance is the bus or car."

"Well, don't let it get you down," Dain said. "You'll pick up the knack soon enough. Just try to relax your knees."

"I would like to relax my entire body," Jabir said, "in a certain house I know about in Beirut. But above all, I want to be out of this ridiculous desert. I shall never understand why anyone lives here of their own free will."

"A few days ought to see us through to the coast," Dain said.

"I hope so. They're holding a big conference about it now."

There were ten riders in the group, all Rakkans except for one Khalidi tribesman; and there was also Maiyidh of the

'Awazim, and Jabir from Rabat and Cairo, and Dain from the United States. That came to thirteen in all—a number no one cared to think about.

There seemed to be several points of difference between Maiyidh and the Rakkans. The discussion, which had begun in whispers, had risen now to shouts, roars, and general abuse. All of them were talking so loud and so fast as to be mutually unintelligible.

"Eventually, I suppose they'll fill us in on their decision," Dain said.

"I don't doubt it; assuming that they ever come to a decision," Jabir said. "These desert peoples are the most disputatious and least cooperative human beings I have ever encountered. They can talk endlessly about anything, and reach agreement on nothing."

Presently Maiyidh detached himself from the group and came over to Dain and Jabir. He was shaking his head dolefully—a man whose patience had been tried beyond endurance.

"Well then," he said, "it seems that things are not as they should be. But then, things never are. Have you found that to be true in your own experience, Dain?"

"Sure," Dain said. "What's gone wrong?"

"Two rafiqs were supposed to meet us here," Maiyidh said. "But only one showed up."

"Couldn't we make do with just one rafiq, whatever that is?"

"We probably could—if the right one had come. But instead, the wrong one came, the one we don't need until later. So the problem is obvious."

"Not to me," Dain said. "Perhaps you'd better tell me what a rafiq is."

"I thought everyone knew," Maiyidh said. "But to put it as simply as possible, let's say that you wish to cross the territory of some particular tribe, just as we wish to do; and that the men of that tribe might rob you, or hold you for ransom, or kill you for your rifle and camel, or even for the sheer sport of it. Well then, to avert these things, you hire a rafiq, who is a man of the tribe whose territory you wish to cross, and who guarantees the safety of you and your party. And if you wish to cross the land of more than one tribe, then you need more than one rafiq."

"How many rafiqs did we require?" Jabir asked.

"Two. One to see us through the territory of the 'Awazim, and another to see us through the Bani Khalid lands, to our destination at Qatif. The man from the Bani Khalid is here,

just as he promised; but the Azmi, whom we need most, is nowhere to be found. The bastard is probably in a Rakkan whorehouse, or lying in a stupor from chewing *qat*."

"Can't the other man take us through somehow?" Dain asked.

"He knows the country well enough," Maiyidh said, "but he cannot act as a rafiq in a territory which is not his own."

"Wait a minute," Dain said, "you're of the 'Awazim, aren't you?"

"Of course, I am," Maiyidh said. "I believe I might have mentioned it to you once or twice. But unfortunately, I cannot be the rafiq for us."

"Why not?" Jabir asked.

Maiyidh shrugged his shoulders and spat on the ground. "Well, perhaps no one told you, but my part of the tribe—the Atharimah—are presently at war against certain other parts of the tribe, particularly the Hadalin, the Muhaliba, and the Shaqfah. The southern section of the Musahimah are fighting with us, and also most of the Muwaijihah. So the rafiq would have to be from a neutral section of the tribe—from the Faqu, for example, or the Alaithat."

"Why are you fighting among yourselves?" Jabir asked.

"It is an interesting matter," Maiyidh said, "which concerns a disputed well, a malicious woman, and an expensive Omaniyah camel. When there is time, I will be glad to tell you all about it. But for now—"

"For now," Dain said, "can't we stay out of 'Awazim country, or go around it?"

"Possibly we can find a way," Maiyidh said. "But the original plan was best, for the shortest way to Qatif is due south, across the 'Awazim lands and into Bani Khalid lands."

"Why not go first to the west?" Jabir asked. "We could stay away from the 'Awazim entirely, as Dain has suggested, and make our way to the Bani Khalid."

"That would be all very well," Maiyidh said, "except that a swing to the west takes us into Mutair territory, and the Mutairis are the hereditary foes of the 'Awazim, and, next to the 'Ajman, their greatest enemies; and they are raiders and killers second to none, and we have no one to act as our rafiq there, either."

"Must we stand here and talk of difficulties?" Jabir asked. "Surely there is something we *can* do?"

"Most certainly. Another way, which I personally proposed, was to proceed south through 'Awazim country without a

rafiq. To do that successfully we would have to avoid all villages in order that word of our movements did not spread. We could do this by passing through the swamps at Ain al Abd, and then striking quickly through down the Hasa coast."

"That sounds good to me," Dain said.

"I also like the sound of it," Jabir said.

"You two are wise men. But the others refuse to pass through the Ain al Abd, which is a place haunted by djinns, and therefore shunned by the more cautious sort of man."

"But that's ridiculous," Jabir said. "They can't afford their superstitions at a time like this. Can't you convince them?"

"I tried, but I cannot," Maiyidh said. "They are only 'Arabdar, you know; town-dwellers who live in fixed dwellings of mud or stone, and who have lost the virtues of their fathers, though none of their vices."

"Well then?" Dain asked. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Yes, there is one final alternative," Maiyidh told him. "We can give up stealth, cross into Saudi Arabia, and travel openly down the road to Riyadh. This is a very excellent road, except for parts around Shiggaig."

"But doesn't that put us in Mutair country?" Jabir asked.

"It does, of course. But the road belongs to the king, not to the Mutairis, and it is under Sa'ud's protection, and there are forts and soldiers here and there along it; and the Mutairi would probably not like to incur Sa'ud's displeasure by raiding his road—at least, not this year."

Jabir said, "That sounds all right. The Saudis are benevolently neutral on the question of Rakka. They might even help us. And we could follow the highway south to the beginning of the Summan ridge, and then turn east into Bani Khalid land, and so to Qatif. Are the others agreed?"

Maiyidh nodded.

"Dain, what do you think?" Jabir asked.

"It sounds all right," Dain said. "I think we should try it."

"Well, I do *not* think so," Maiyidh said with sudden venom. "I do not like the Saudis and I do not wish to travel on the highway to their capital. Have you ever met any of their soldiers? Red-eyed Wahhabi fanatics, most of them, and treacherous to the core—especially those from the Nejd, of whom the Prophet thought so little. The Shammar are a noble people, I'll grant you, and so are the 'Utaiba. But who could trust a man of the Harb, or of the Sbei, when he is carrying the king's rifle and wearing the king's arrogance?"

"Well, damn it," Dain said, "we have to do something and

do it quickly. So if you won't travel on the Riyadh highway—"

"I never said that," Maiyidh replied. "I merely expressed my opinion, as I have every right to do. Soldiers are more deadly than tribesmen, and I do not like to deliver myself into the hands of a possible enemy."

"But the Saudis are on our side," Dain reminded him.

"No man is a friend until he has proven that he is not an enemy," Maiyidh countered. "I don't like this plan, which is the sort of thing that townsmen always think up. But what does my opinion matter? Come, we leave at once."

Maiyidh turned away abruptly and stalked back to his camel. The group mounted and took off at a swift trot, with the red rim of the sun at their backs, heading for the Tawal-al-Mutair and the Riyadh highway.

Chapter 10

The Fifth Day

In Rakka, the dull red morning sun rose wearily out of the Persian Gulf, giving promise of a life-draining windless day. A squad of soldiers limped into the Zocalo Chico, exhausted and ill-tempered after an unsuccessful night pursuit of a suspicious American oilman. They glared at the sun and talked about kulaibain weather—high heat, higher humidity, and not a breath of wind. It was August 30th, and Canopus had been sighted low on the horizon, but the shamal still refused to blow and summer refused to depart. It was intolerable: on days like this, only suicide, murder, or madness could be considered normal. Anything else was superhuman.

On the northern side of the square, in the center building, on the fourth floor, no one had bothered to turn out the lights in the police offices. Colonel Zeyd came in, unfastened his heavy gun belt and let it crash onto the desk. His uniform was no longer immaculate, and his hairy hands no longer obeyed him with military precision. He was sick of Rakka and the cat-and-mouse game he was forced to play there. He was a soldier, not a damned politician. He was a man of action; he wanted to do something with his machine-gun squads, his recoilless rifles, his mortars. He wanted—

"No luck?" Hakim inquired silkily.

The Iraqi agent was lying on the couch with two fans directed at him. Colonel Zeyd looked at the man and had a superhuman moment in which he resisted the almost overwhelming desire to take out his Browning and shoot Hakim twice—once up each nostril.

"No luck at all," Zeyd said. "We did manage to get one of them—an 'Awazim tribesman who was to act as their rafiq through his tribe's territory."

"I would like to question him."

"I'm afraid that will not be possible," Colonel Zeyd said. "The man made some insulting remarks and the soldiers beat him and accidentally broke his neck."

"That was *extremely* unwise," Hakim said.

"It was unwise of the Azmi to say anything in such weather. Blame it on the damned kulaibain."

"I doubt if they'll take that view in Baghdad," Hakim said. "As it happens, I also found a man. Not one of the escaping party, I think, but perhaps not entirely innocent."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I encountered him near the Mecca Gate while I was having my morning stroll."

"You feel he is connected with the independence movement?"

"Perhaps," Hakim said. "He is a local man, well-educated, and nosy in a quiet sort of way. An interesting type, worth keeping a file on and well worth having a conversation with."

"Who is this man?"

"Hassan el-Dihn el-Aoudi, a geologist."

"What did he say to you?"

"Not one word," Hakim said sadly.

"You couldn't persuade him to open his mouth?"

"That was not the difficulty," Hakim said. "His mouth, as it happened, was obligingly open; but still I could not persuade him to talk. Nor could you, nor could anyone else. Hyenas had eaten out his stomach, but there was enough left of his face for me to recognize him."

"How had he been killed?"

"A knife between his ribs."

"By whom?"

"Perhaps by his enemies, who would have had their reasons; perhaps by his friends, who might had had even better reasons."

"I don't understand that riddle," Zeyd said.

"It is merely a *tentative* riddle," Hakim explained with a smile.

"By God! Perhaps you killed him yourself!"

"Perhaps," Hakim said. He rose lazily to his feet. "And now, Commandant, if you will put a car at my disposal, my men and I will take leave of you."

Zeyd hadn't even known that Hakim had brought some of his own men into Rakka. But he hid his surprise and said: "Why bother with a car? My driver can take all of you to the airport. You'll be in Baghdad by evening."

"But we are not going to Baghdad, Commandant."

"No? To Basra, then?"

"Most certainly not. I am going after the American and his friends."

Colonel Zeyd just stared for a moment. Then he said, "*You* are going to pursue them? In a car?"

"I? Of course, I. It is the job I must do—the job you failed at. And I shall begin the journey in a car, though God alone knows how I shall end it."

"They must be out of the Rakka zone by now," Zeyd said. "They must have crossed into Saudi Arabia."

"It seems a reasonable assumption. I too shall cross into Saudi Arabia."

"Won't the Saudis have something to say about that?"

"We have various papers and passports," Hakim said. "There will be no difficulty at the frontier."

"That's excellent," Zeyd said. "So you can cross into Saudi Arabia. What then?" The Commandant walked over to a wall map of Iraq, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. "Look at it!" he told the Iraq agent. "Thousands of square miles of desolation in the interior of the Saudi kingdom. But perhaps you prefer the Hasa coast?"

"I do, as a matter of fact."

"So do I. But *where* on the coast? They could leave Saudi Arabia anywhere between here and Salwa—a distance of some three hundred miles."

"Three hundred and twenty-four miles, to be specific," Hakim said.

"And besides, Salwa is not the end of the world. They could go to Qatar, to the Trucial States, to Oman—they could go to the Hadhramaut or Yemen—"

"—or Africa, or the moon," Hakim said. "Really, Commandant, you shouldn't let your imagination take such a grip on you. They are men just like any other men; they have their possibilities and their limitations, and they are bound by the stringencies of their situation. And since I have some slight idea of what they are trying to do, I also have an idea of what they cannot do if they hope to accomplish their goal."

"It is beyond me," the Commandant confessed, settling back into his armchair. "I am a simple soldier. What you propose to do sounds like magic."

"It is simply a job that one trains for," Hakim said. "It is nothing but a job; though admittedly a more difficult one than flinging around a division or two of troops. . . . And I have my sources of information, as you may have guessed."

"Yes, I suppose you would have to. Who did you get your information from here in Rakka?"

"Alas, I cannot tell you, I must protect my sources."

"You must tell me," Zeyd said. "I am Commandant here."

"Perhaps I'll tell you at some later time—if you are still Commandant. Now, could I have a car, please?"

"Take the white Buick in front of this building."

Hakim shook his head. "If you don't mind, I'd rather have one without Iraqi diplomatic license plates."

"Then take the blue Chevrolet beside it, which has Kuwaiti plates. The keys are in the car. Is there anything else you require?"

"Nothing at all, Colonel. Good-bye, and thank you for your hospitality."

"Good luck, Hakim."

"Thank you. And good luck to you, Commandant."

Hakim left, and Colonel Zeyd sat for a long time staring at the telephone. He knew that he would not be Commandant of Rakka for much longer. Where would the Baghdad authorities send him? Probably to some dreary fortress in the desert, or to a waterlogged outpost in the marshes below Al Qurna. Perhaps they would reduce him in rank; perhaps they would shoot him if they thought he had bungled the affair badly.

He was too tired to care much at the moment.

He continued to stare at the telephone, and a thought occurred to him. He could call up the Saudi frontier post and tell them—anonymously—that a notorious Iraqi agent and several of his men were about to pass through. Perhaps the Saudis would shoot Hakim, or at least imprison him for twenty years. It would do nothing for Colonel Zeyd and his unpromising situation, of course; it would merely give him a measure of satisfaction.

But that was the sort of thinking that one did during kulaibain weather. Suicide, murder, madness. . . . The only thing that held a man back was fatigue.

Anyhow, Hakim had probably considered the possibility of such a move, and taken his precautions. He was really quite a man, Hakim—nearly as clever as he was detestable.

Chapter 11

Dain's party kept up their steady, distance-consuming trot for the entire day, stopping only once, at the Khabari Wadha well. Here they met a small party of Sbei sheepherders driving their flocks down from Kuwait. They exchanged local gossip and heard with glee of the marches and countermarches of tired Iraqi soldiers across the length and breadth of the Rakkan area. They also heard of the educated young geologist who had been found murdered. Hassan, his name had been; a man of the Aoudis, so it was told. His killer had not yet been discovered.

The Rakkan party took the news with no show of emotion. But Jabir walked a few yards away from the others, and Dain followed him.

"You knew him?" Dain asked.

"I knew him well," Jabir said, his face grim. "His loyalty to our cause was complete; and he was my friend, as well."

"Who do you think killed him?" Dain asked.

"The Iraquis, I suppose. There is one Baghdadi special agent whom we know to be in Rakka. A man named Hakim. If he had suspected Hassan, this would have been his way of silencing all doubt."

"I only met Hassan once," Dain said. "He seemed a good man."

"He was a better man than I," Jabir said. "His death will not go unavenged."

Dain nodded. "Come on, we'd better get back to the others."

Dain's party spent about half an hour at the Khabari well, just long enough to replenish their water supplies. Then they moved on.

If these were soft-living townsmen, as Maiyidh had said, they showed no evidence of it. They ate, drank, and performed their acts of nature from the saddle, at a trot. They were stringy

little men, tough as rawhide. Dain hoped he could keep up with them.

His knee joints had stopped aching hours ago, and had gone completely numb. Like Jabir, he didn't think about his aches and pains, the weariness of the journey, nor the uncertainty of the destination. He knew that to think about his miseries would simply intensify them. Unlike Jabir, he had no handy little packet of qat to help dull his agonies.

The king's highway, which snaked down from Kuwait in the north to the capital of Riyadh, was nothing much by Western standards. Dain had heard that a new black-top road had been built from the Dhahran oil fields to the capital; but that was hundreds of miles to the south. It was a section of road he would probably never see. The party had to contend with a gravel track that wound its way between flat-topped hills, with only an occasional cairn or clump of bushes to break the monotony of the lifeless yellow-gray plain. They even came to appreciate gravel when they had to negotiate an occasional stretch of soft, time-consuming sand.

At the Wabra oasis Maiyidh met a Rashidi returning from Riyadh on a mangy camel. He fell into conversation with the man, and gave the party a chance for a rest. Their talk was long and animated, since the 'Awazim, being of non-Sharif origin, can intermarry only with the Rashaida and a few other tribes.

The two men talked for better than an hour, and then Maiyidh stalked over to Dain with a scowl deeper than usual on his long face.

"His name is Abdulla ibn Hujailan," he told Dain, "and it seems that we are third cousins on my mother's side. I personally have no great admiration for the Rashaida, since they acknowledge themselves serfs of the noble Mutair, and are even proud of the connection. But it stands to reason that they know a great deal about Mutairi matters."

"So what?" Dain asked.

"So I have learned some extremely valuable information," Maiyidh said. "Do you remember the horses?"

"What horses?"

"The Shawaf horses, which originally belonged to the Mutair, and one of which that so-called Omani was riding. That Shawaf horse saved your life, if you will recall, since Ben Alyma, spotting the discrepancy—"

"Yes, yes," Dain said. "I remember now."

"Well, then. As far as Ben Alyma and I knew, the horses

belonged at present to the Rubiah in Iraq. But that is no longer the case. According to Abdulla, the Rubiah sustained devastating surprise attack by certain Iraq shepherd tribes of the Muntafiq confederation."

Abdulla had come over to listen. He was a stocky, bull-necked man, blind in one eye from trachoma. He said, "I'm surprised you didn't hear about it. This happened two years ago, or perhaps three, during one of the Kurdish uprisings. With the Iraqi army preoccupied, the Muntafiq took the opportunity to pay off an old blood-debt, and they came away with the Shawaf horses and a great deal of other booty."

"I don't see how it concerns us," Jabir said.

"You shall see," Maiyidh said. "Tell them what happened next," he said to Abdulla.

"Well, the entire herd was kept by the Budur tribes, who had led the attack and secured a decisive victory. But once they had the horses, they didn't know what to do with them. They are They are nomads and horse-riders, these Budur, and a thoroughbred mare is a very suitable beast for raiding. And they amp. And they did not wish to incur Saudi wrath, since every year the Budur migrate into the Tawal-al-Mutair in Arabia. But they also did not wish to incur the anger of the Mutair, into whose territory they migrated."

"Sticky position," Dain said.

"It was solved without too much difficulty," Abdulla said. "They discussed the matter with some of the more important Mutairi sheikhs, who could appreciate the position. You see, out of old enmity, the Saudi king would not allow the Mutair to buy back their own herd; but neither did the king want that famous herd in Iraqi hands. So the Mutair reasoned that the herd might best go to the Harb, who, although allied to Sa'ud, were friendly to the Mutairi and whose territory adjoined theirs. The Mutair reasoned that the king might someday relent and let them buy back their own herd; or the Saudis might become weakened in their grasp on the country, in which case the horses might be stolen back in a raid. And so the Budur sold the herd to the Harb."

"And so," Maiyidh said, "that supposed Omani messenger must have been a Harb tribesman, whose people are friends and allies of Sa'ud."

"It would seem that the Saudis are against us," Jabir said. "But it makes no sense. Why should they oppose us?"

Abdulla of the Rashaida said, "I know nothing of your politics—though the 'Awazim have always been too tricky for

their own good. Nor do I want to know, since I am a prudent man and this gives the sensation of a rash and foolish adventure. But you will learn shortly just what the Saudis want, and, supposing that they do oppose you, you will learn why."

"Speak straight, cousin," Maiyidh said.

"It should be clear enough, even for a blind, headstrong 'Awazim. Look you, we are in an oasis of some size and importance. So of course there is a fortress. It is located on the high ground to the west. You can see the top of it rising above the palm grove."

"Yes, I can see it," Maiyidh said. "What does it matter?"

"To me, it matters not at all," Abdulla said. "But I went to the fortress immediately upon arriving at Wabra, since I carried a tax receipt from the officials at Riyadh concerning my people, the Dalul Rashaida, who are camped west of here near the well called Qara'a, and who have been unjustly accused—"

"For the love of God, Abdulla, can't you tell us straight out what concerns us?"

"I tell a story in my own way," Abdulla said stolidly. "Where was I? Yes, I went to the fortress to present my tax receipt so that the governor of the Summan region would recommend his soldiers to stop taking our livestock in place of payment. And while I was standing in the fortress waiting for someone to notice me, I heard the wireless clattering, and I heard the wireless operator muttering the words as he wrote the message. And he said, 'Party of ten or twelve men—one American—traveling south from Rakka—take immediately into captivity—kill them only if they resist.' "

Abdulla waited to savor the expressions on their faces. Then he continued: "So the telegraph operator called out, 'Captain, Captain!' And a soldier said, 'He is down at the Mubarraz camping ground, amusing himself with a little shepherd boy.' And the telegraph operator said, 'He must be called at once!' And the soldier said, 'He will not appreciate being disturbed.' And the wireless operator said, 'The authorities at Riyadh will not appreciate it if he is *not* disturbed.' And the soldier looked annoyed, but he said, 'I will bring him myself, but it had better be important.' And the wireless operator said, 'It *is* important, therefore hurry.' And I realized that it would be some little time before I was able to show the sergeant my tax receipt, and so I departed."

"How long ago was this?" Maiyidh asked.

"Perhaps two hours, or perhaps a little longer."

"And why did you not come straight to us and tell us?"

"It was no affair of mine," the Rashidi said. "And I have enough troubles of my own so that I have no need to borrow the troubles of others. But I came over to see what manner of men you were, and when I learned that you are my cousin I decided to speak. But you must leave in a quiet, unhurried manner in order to preserve my life, and you must never tell the Saudis that I told you."

"That I swear," Maiyidh said. "Thank you, cousin. I am in your debt, and I will repay it someday, God willing, if I live. . . ." He turned to the Rakkans. "Now, mount, we leave at once!"

The order was unnecessary, As soon as Jabir had heard about possible trouble with the Saudi soldiers, he had gone over and told the others. The camels had already been repacked and mounted, and the group was moving off at a slow trot.

Dain and Maiyidh mounted and caught up with the group. "What now?" Dain asked.

"The answer to that may well be in the hands of the Saudis, and of God," Maiyidh said. "Keep alert, and keep your rifles ready. We shall soon see."

They left the Riyadh road, turning eastward toward the coast almost by instinct. They were still in the oasis, and they rode through several little mud villages, with date-palm groves on either side interspersed with bleak little patches of wheat.

"Damn it, why don't they make their move?" Jabir asked.

"Maybe the soldier had trouble finding the sergeant," Dain suggested. "And maybe they want to take us outside of the villages, in case there's shooting."

They continued to the east, and the vast desert opened up before them beyond the last group of mud huts. It was brown and gray in the evening light, and half a dozen flat-topped mesas showed up black against the darkening sky.

"They are hiding behind those huts," Maiyidh said suddenly.

"How can you tell?" Jabir asked.

"I can smell them," Maiyidh said proudly. "I can smell the new leather of their belts and the gasoline of their truck. They will ambush us as we come abreast."

"They're supposed to take us alive," Jabir said.

Maiyidh shrugged. "It is safer and easier to kill us, and tell them at Riyadh that we resisted."

"All right," Dain said. "Have one of the men stop and adjust the straps of his camel pack."

Maiyidh whispered the order, and a man got down and began to adjust his pack. The others halted and waited for him.

"What do you say to a counterambush?" Dain asked.

Jabir nodded, and Maiyidh said, "To surprise the surprisers is the best tactic in war. Shall we charge suddenly, going two ways around the mud houses?"

"They might be prepared for that," Dain said.

"So they might . . . What, then?"

"How strong are the walls of those mud huts?" Dain asked.

"You could put your foot through one without difficutly."

"All right, then. A few men will go forward, but will pull back when the firing starts. The rest will go around the huts. You and I and Jabir will go directly through the huts."

"I like that plan," Maiyidh said. "Dain, you should have been a Bedouin! Now it only remains to be seen if you have the inestimable quality of luck."

Jabir said, "Let's get started. That man can't stand fixing his pack all night."

"Right," Dain said. "Pass the word: the first three men go ahead and pull back when the firing gets hot; the others charge around the rear, we three go straight through the middle. Do you see that cone-shaped hill about three hundred yards out? We'll assemble there, if there's anything left to assemble."

Jabir passed the word. Dain asked Maiyidh, "Do you thing our men are up to this sort of thing?"

"Who can tell?" Maiyidh answered. "They are Arabdar, as I told you; men of the towns rather than the desert, and therefore lacking in the qualities of the true Bedouin. But they seem good enough men all the same."

"We'll find out soon enough," Dain said. "Is everybody ready, Jabir?"

Jabir nodded.

"Then tell the man fixing his pack to mount, and tell the first three men to start forward."

Jabir gave the order. As the men moved out, Maiyidh said, "This should be good sport, Dain; unless we get killed, of course."

Chapter 12

The first three men advanced slowly and unhappily. They appreciated the principle of the counterambush, but they didn't see why *they* had to be the ones to draw the first fire. It was unfair, it was thoroughly inequitable, but there had been no time to argue about it. So they moved forward, animated by equal parts of courage and fatalism, and they prayed it would turn out well for them, *Insha'llah*.

They came past the edge of the last mud hut, saw the gleam of sunset on a rifle barrel and ducked down on the far side of their camels. A hoarse voice shouted a command; shots rang out, and a camel bellowed in agony.

Simultaneously, the second group came around the mud huts at a gallop, shouting war cries and firing wildly. They saw a little knot of khaki-clad men with their backs to them; and they saw one 50-caliber machine gun pointed straight at them. The Saudis had also heard of counterambushes.

There was no way of retreating, though, because the galloping camels could not be checked. So they charged the position, screaming like dervishes.

The machine-gunner panicked and pulled the triggers before he had a firm grip on the handles. The heavy barrel immediately rose to its maximum elevation and spat bullets at the sky. Cursing wildly, the gunner got control of his weapon and managed to kill one man, and to stitch a neat line of holes down the side of a saddle-pack. Then the riders were on him, and the foot of a camel struck him square on the forehead and splattered his brains across the sand.

Dain, Jabir, and Maiyidh charged through the last mud hut as they had planned, smashing through the front wall with ease, sending a woman and three children scrambling into a corner for safety, and then breaking out through the rear wall. They found themselves in the middle of a confused and frightened squad of soldiers. They had arrived just as the group attacking from the rear came charging through.

It was too close and too chaotic to use rifles. Dain and Jabir clubbed any head that came within range, and urged their camels forward. Maiyidh shouted something unintelligible and jumped down from his camel.

The rear group crashed into and through the soldiers at a full gallop. Unable to check their mounts, they kept right on going toward the conical hill that Dain had mentioned.

Maiyidh fought his way back to his camel with carbine and knife. Grinning broadly, he said, "Shall we leave here? Or shall we stay and kill them all?"

"Let's get out fast," Dain said.

Their camels were, for once, only too pleased to comply. As soon as they were past the mass of soldiers, the camels, with rolling eyes and bared teeth, stretched out into a full gallop that would have done credit to a gazelle.

Behind them the soldiers were trying to get organized, and the sergeant was screaming orders at the top of his lungs. Four men dragged the machine gun around, moving so hastily that they knocked it over. By the time they had it set up again Dain and his group were out of range. But the soldiers fired anyhow, in order to show that their hearts were in the right place.

"Beautiful, just beautiful!" Maiyidh shouted to Dain. "I shall compose a poem about this! What a marvelous and exquisite charge it was!"

"It was pretty nice," Dain admitted.

The cone-shaped hill loomed up ahead of them, and they found the rest of the riders waiting. They were excited, nervous, and exhilarated. At the moment they considered themselves invincible.

"Did we lose anyone?" Dain asked.

"Yes," one of the Rakkans said. "Hazza was killed by the machine gun in the charge across their rear, and Maziad was also killed as we charged through. And in the front group, Ridan was killed by rifle fire."

"Anyone wounded?"

"I was shot in the thigh," the Rakkan said, "but the wound is near the surface and therefore not serious. Amar was shot in the stomach and will probably die within the hour. And two of the camels were killed outright, and another wounded past healing, and one wounded lightly."

"Three men dead, one dying," Dain said. "What a hell of an ambush *that* was."

"It was a fine ambush," the Rakkan said. "We killed at least fifteen of them!"

Dain would have put the estimate at six or seven, with another one or two probable. But he let them have their feeling of satisfaction.

"So we have lost four men, counting Amar, and three camels," said Maiyidh. "Two of us will have to ride double. You, Omar, and you, Badr, look to be the lightest. Mount together on Ridan's camel. But first, gather all the water, food, and ammunition from the dead. Move, now, we must ride out of here!"

By the time the packs were redistributed, Amar was nearly dead of his stomach wound. He was unconscious, and his pulse was barely detectable beneath Dain's fingers.

"There is no time to wait for him to die," Jabir said. "Come, we must move!"

The others agreed. They left Amar on the sand, his head supported by a sheepskin saddle-cover and a cloak tied over his wound to keep out blowflies. They started off at a trot, eastward toward the coast.

"Where are we going?" Jabir asked.

"I don't know," Maiyidh said. "We will talk about it later. But for now, we must get as far and as quickly from here as we can."

Dain and Jabir nodded agreement. The group strung out, moving at a slow trot to give the camels time to recover their wind. The afterglow of sunset flared for a moment behind them, then went out like a blown candle. Suddenly, and with self-conscious drama, it was full night on the desert.

Chapter 13

Half an hour later, Dain asked Maiyidh: "Why did you get off your camel during the fight?"

"In order to prevent them from pursuing us," Maiyidh said.

"In what way?"

"I went over to their truck and shot holes in both front tires."

Jabir asked, "Don't they have any other vehicles?"

"Of course," Maiyidh told him. "But no others at Wabra with the special tires that can travel over soft sand."

"That was good work," Dain said. "While you were over there, did you perhaps put a few bullets into the truck's engine?"

"I never thought of it," Maiyidh said, crestfallen. "Damn! But it is what happens in the heat of battle—you set your heart on one objective, and forget all other matters."

"They can repair the tires," Jabir said. "Perhaps they can be ready to pursue us in an hour or less. How fast can these sand trucks go?"

"A lot faster than galloping camels," Maiyidh said.

"Then shouldn't we speed up our pace?"

"Not yet. It will do us no good to kill the camels."

They rode in silence for a while. Then Dain said, "They won't be able to pursue us very well at night. And by morning the wind may have covered our tracks."

"It won't matter what the wind does or does not do," Maiyidh said gloomily. "All of these Saudi fortresses carry Murra trackers, whose skill is proverbial. They are men of the southern desert, the deep, empty sand desert to the south, and they can look at a camel's track and say whether she is white or brown, male or female, and even if she is in foal. They can look at a windswept mark in the sand that would appear to you or me like any other mark; but the Murri will know if it is only a formation of the wind, or the remains of a footprint. And if it *is* a footprint, he will know in which direction

the traveler was going, and how many were with him, and how heavily laden he was."

"You spin a beautiful tale," Jabir said.

"Wait and see for yourself," Maiyidh told him. "Whatever distance we make by night, the Saudis will overcome by day in their sand truck. . . . God, why did I not shoot the engine?"

"How far are we from the coast?" Dain asked.

"About two nights and two days," Maiyidh said. "If we ride hard enough to kill our camels."

"And how long will the Saudis need to overtake us?"

"A night, a day, and a night. That is the very most. Perhaps they can do it sooner if their tracker is especially good."

"Not a promising outlook," Dain said. "Any ideas, Jabir? Maiyidh?"

Jabir shook his head. Maiyidh said, "My only idea is to pray. But I do not think we will be able to reach Qatif without a miracle."

"Perhaps we won't need the miracle," Dain said. "We're not going to Qatif any longer."

Jabir looked up, startled. "But we *must* go there! A boat and a car are waiting for us; everything has been arranged."

"I know. That's part of the reason we're not going."

"Kindly explain," Jabir said.

"Look, it's simple enough. Somebody knows just about everything we're planning. That's apparent enough. Somebody knew that we were going to take the Riyadh highway, and that we were going to pass Wabra. That someone told the Saudis, who don't seem to be our friendly allies any longer. So we must assume that this someone also knows that our destination is Qatif, and that a reception party will be waiting there for us just in case the patrol doesn't overtake us first."

"I don't understand why the Saudis are trying to stop us," Maiyidh said.

"It should be clear enough," Jabir said. "They are involved once again in the treachery for which they are famous."

"Of course, that much is apparent. But the *manner* in which they have gone about this treachery is what puzzles me."

"Must we go into that now?" Jabir said. "It seems to me that we have more pressing matters."

"Perhaps we should go into it," Dain said. "We can help ourselves best if we understand what's going on. What do you mean, Maiyidh, by the *manner* in which they have performed their treachery?"

"I mean that it was unnecessarily devious. Consider: we believed them to be our allies. They acquire Raoudi's signet ring, or a good copy of it, and send a man to Rakka telling Ben Alyma that he must kill Dain. All well and good; an ally has delivered a valuable message. But why the pretense about the messenger? Why have him say that he is an Omani come straight from the Committee in Qatar rather than a Harb from Riyadh? With that signet ring to prove himself by, Ben Alyma would have accepted the word of that man of Sa'ud's. I know something about intrigue; but overcomplication is sheer waste."

"For that matter," Jabir said, "why should the Saudis act against us, as we must assume they are doing? Would they help their enemies, the Iraqis? Never!"

"Unless some secret deal has taken place," Dain said.

"Perhaps the Saudis want to take over Rakka themselves," Maiyidh suggested.

"Undoubtedly they would like to," Jabir said. "After all, what king would not like to own a piece of oil-rich land, even if his own country is already swimming in oil? But the Saudis could not have been planning that, for the Iraqis would never allow it to happen. The Iraqis might stand aside and allow Rakkan independence, since it poses no threat to them. But they would be certain to move their armies across the Hajara and crush Sa'ud if he occupied one square foot of Rakkan soil."

"The Iraqis could do it, too," Dain said. "And Sa'ud must know that."

"Of course he knows it," Jabir said. "And yet, what can be the reason behind all this—assuming, of course, that you are not actually a traitor, Sayyid Dain—which I do indeed assume."

"Thanks," Dain said. "I don't know why the Saudis acted as they did. But I'll be giving it some thought. In the meantime, we'd better decide on where we want to go."

"You really think they'll be waiting for us in Qatif?" Jabir asked.

"Don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose it stands to reason. It just saddens me. All arrangements have been made so carefully there, and Qatif is so close to the British in Bahrein, which in turn is so close to our final destination in Qatar."

"It can't be helped," Dain said. "What alternatives can you think of?"

"Well. . . . Perhaps we could outwit the Saudis," Jabir said. "What if we continued as if we were going to Qatif, then turned quickly and took refuge with the foreign oil companies in Dhahran?"

"We could outwit the Saudis," Maiyidh said, "but not their Murra tracker. And Dhahran would add another half-day to our trip, which already is too long."

"Then name your own preference," Jabir said.

"I say that we should get to the coast as quickly as possible," Maiyidh said. "We should go straight to Jubail at Bahri, which is a fishing and pearling port of fair size, and the closest town on the Hasa coast from where we are now."

"That's what the Saudis might well expect us to do," Jabir said.

"We can't very well flap our arms and fly to the moon, which is the only thing they would *not* expect of us. What do you say, Dain?"

"It sounds all right to me," Dain said. "How much time will we save by choosing Jubail over Qatif?"

"Half a day; perhaps, with luck, a day."

"Then that's what we'll do. Maiyidh, can you guide us there?"

"Of course. Jubail is within my own land, the country of the 'Awazim. I know every mountain and wadi, every rock and each grain of sand."

"Remember," Jabir said, "we have no rafiq."

"Once inside the town itself, we need no safe conduct," Maiyidh said. "And as for the journey—an Azmi's bullet feels exactly like a Saudi's bullet."

"Then let's move," Dain said. "And can't we pick up the pace a little?"

"We can try," Maiyidh said. "Come, hah!" And he slapped his camel sharply across the rump.

His camel picked up its stride, grunting and complaining, and the others followed. Dain said to Jabir, "Remember to relax your knees. It's really the whole trick to camel riding."

"Dain," Jabir said, "sometimes you can be extremely irritating."

"I only mentioned it for your own good," Dain said. And then he stopped talking, for he was occupied with hanging on to his galloping camel and trying to relax his knees.

Chapter 14

The Sixth Day

The march continued through the night at the rapid pace set by Maiyidh. The stars glittered more brilliantly than Dain had ever before seen them, and the sight of that vast night sky almost made Dain forget the grit of sand between his teeth and the faint nausea which the front-and-sideways lurch of the camel produced. Almost, but not quite.

The black sky changed to the darkest of grays; the stars began to dim. Maiyidh plucked a hair from his head and held it before his eyes. He declared that he could distinguish it against the sky, so the group halted for the morning prayer. When it was over, Maiyidh would not let them brew coffee. They could drink water and munch dates while they rode, and they could stretch their legs for a year, if they wished—once they were safely out of Saudi Arabia.

The sky changed through innumerable hues of gray, and the stars faded to pinpoints and were gone. The sun's rim appeared over the horizon behind them, a tawny lion yellow, but without enough heat in it yet to drive off the night chills. It rose quickly, a cruel and lucid light that showed each tortured line of the desert in harsh relief. A light breeze sprang up from the northwest—a shamal, Maiyidh called it, or perhaps only the beginnings of one. Still, it meant that the death-giving summer was finally reaching its end, and that the autumn monsoons would soon begin.

At midday Maiyidh brought them to the little water hole called Arkhaimiya. No other Bedouins were there, and the travelers drank greedily and filled their canteens and water-skins with the muddy water. They ate a hasty lunch, and Maiyidh told Dain and Jabir that this would be their last stop in the northern Jafura desert. There were no more water holes, no more settlements until they reached Jubail al Bahri on the Hasa coast. But he didn't tell the others, because he was afraid it might unnerve them.

They had about 150 miles to go, some of it over gravel and

basalt, a few stretches over sand. Most of the Rakkans were in a state of fatigue and depression, a natural letdown after last evening's blood-stirring charge through the Saudi troops. The camels were in poor condition, undernourished after the long, severe summer and not up to hard riding.

"Look at their humps," Maiyidh said to Dain. "Do you see how small they are, how lacking in fat? That shows how much they have suffered in the last months. These camels should not be trotted. They should not even be ridden. They should be led with gentleness, and told of the fine pasturage just a few miles ahead."

"That would fine if only we didn't have a Saudi patrol breathing down the backs of our necks."

"Yes, we must ride them to death," Maiyidh said with a sigh. "But what if they die before we reach Jubail?"

"Then we're finished," Dain said. "If the patrol doesn't get us, the desert will."

"Those soldiers must not take us," Maiyidh said. "Remember, we have killed some of their men, and they will let us know with great force and subtlety what they think of that. Their attentions could last for several days, and at the end of it they will bring our heads back to Riyadh. Dain, we must not let that happen."

"How are we to prevent it, if they catch up with us?"

"We will stand and fight," Maiyidh said, "and when they begin to overwhelm us you must shoot me, Dain, a good shot that will kill. Do you promise you will do that for me?"

"Yes, I'll do it," Dain said. "I promise you that, Maiyidh."

"And after that," Maiyidh said, "I earnestly suggest that you kill yourself, Sayyid Dain."

"I might," Dain said.

Jabir had been listening to the conversation. He said, "Really, isn't all this a trifle melodramatic?"

"If you consider it so," Maiyidh said, "then let yourself be taken as their prisoner, if defeat is what our fate decrees. You have heard of the game of soccer?"

"Of course."

"Well, it is also played here on the peninsula. But some of the Saudi soldiers like to use a human head in place of a ball. But more often, they favor the practice of burying a man in sand up to his neck, facing the sun. They cut off his eyelids to make sure he misses nothing, and then they make camp twenty or thirty feet away, and eat and drink and lounge at their ease. This is what passes for humor among the Saudi

soldiers, and I could tell you a good deal more if you would care to hear it."

"I've heard quite enough," Jabir said. "I know that you Bedouins like to tell tall stories, but I think I would very much not like to be captured by these Saudis. Shall we ride?"

"Let us, by all means," Dain said. "And I don't think it would do any harm to circulate Maiyidh's stories among the men. Fear can act as a strong stimulant."

"But sometimes a man becomes paralyzed through fear," Jabir said. "It all depends upon the man."

"Maiyidh, you know more about these Rakkans than we do," Dain said. "Tell them about those Saudi practices if you think it will help spur them on."

Maiyidh nodded. "I only wish I could tell stories to the camels," he said. "If so, I could induce them to ride to the end of the world. There is something else we must do now, Dain."

"What is it?"

"We must lighten our loads to the utmost for the sake of the beasts. Not here, not where any object can be spotted from a mile away. Come, I will find a place."

When the others had mounted, Maiyidh led them across a rocky gorge, and stopped when he found a fissure in the rock's surface. It was about five feet across, and the bottom was hidden in black shadow.

"Now then, you men," Maiyidh cried, "we must get rid of every piece of equipment that we can live without. It is for the camels, and therefore for our own lives; every pound off the back of your camel will give him another mile. Come now, no holding back! All of the saddle bags must go, and the *mirakas*, those of you rich enough to have them; and the leather bags for the rifles, and the coffee pots and the mortar and pestles, and the coffee roaster and stirrer, and the cups, and all the other equipment. And also throw away your wooden bowls, no matter what they cost! And also any extra clothing and ornaments, and any extra rifles. Each man must carry his bare rifle, and only one bandolier of ammunition—because if the Saudis catch up with us, it will not be a long fight. And keep one canteen or waterskin of water, no more, and your bag of dates and dried milk."

Maiyidh paced fiercely among them and made sure that his orders were carried out. He let each man keep his khusa ("You may need it to slit your throat with," he told them.) and also his cloak. And he told them to keep all their money.

Some of it was in Indian rupees, some in Iraqi dinars, some in Saudi riyals; but most of it was in bulky Maria Theresa thalers. Dain had a fair supply of dollars, rupees, and sterling on his person, and he asked Maiyidh if this wouldn't do in place of the heavy thalers.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Maiyidh said. "God alone knows what it will cost to hire a boat and crew in Jubail; and perhaps with enough money we could bribe the Saudi soldiers if we should be so unlucky as to have them overtake us. But I think not, since we have killed some of their men."

All of the goods which Maiyidh had ordered abandoned were thrown into the fissure, and the Rakkans regained enough energy to wail over their loss. For nearly all of them it meant casting away the greater part of their worldly goods; and some were abandoning treasured old pots and bowls which had been handed down from father to son through the generations.

Maiyidh looked into the fissure from every angle, making sure that nothing could be seen. He said to the Rakkans, "Listen to me, you men! I am of the 'Awazim, and your treasures are hidden in 'Awazim country, in a place which I will easily be able to find again. And I swear to you upon my honor and upon the honor of my tribe that no Azmi will touch your goods, and that as soon as it becomes possible I will tell what happened to the great sheikhs of the 'Awazim, and they will bring back your goods to you without so much as a coffee bean stolen. This I swear to you before God, upon my honor, upon my father's honor, and upon my tribe's honor. Now, quickly, we ride!"

They set off at a quick trot, across basalt and granite that seemed to have the fires of hell burning beneath it.

"Will you really be able to get them their goods back?" Dain asked.

"I must do it, if I live," Maiyidh said, his face solemn. "And if it happens that any man among them is killed before reaching his home, then I must return the goods to his sons and wives. I have no choice. I must do it because I have pledged my honor."

Chapter 15

The party continued through the blast-furnace heat of the Hasa coast. Maiyidh, with his detailed knowledge of every mesa and wadi in the 'Awazim country, led them steadily in a direction a little south of east. They stopped for a few minutes in the mid-afternoon, but Maiyidh would not allow anyone to drink. The water was for the camels, he said, and the Rakkans looked on sadly while their bedraggled beasts drank their fill.

They went on. The sun, yellow-white in a cloudless blue sky, seemed to cling to the firmament, unwilling to take its nightly plunge into the Red Sea. Dain glanced back at it from time to time, and he was sure that it hadn't descended an inch in an hour. It seemed destined to hang there forever, broiling them to death in their saddles.

But the sun had to let go at last, and the sudden desert evening arrived. Maidiyh stopped the party when he calculated that it was time for the evening prayers, and he let the Rakkans lie in the cooling sand for an hour—not for their sake, he explained, but because the camel's required the rest. And then they mounted and started off again, just south of east, toward a coast in whose existence Dain had ceased to believe.

"At least, the sand truck hasn't caught up with us yet," Maiyidh told Dain. "That is because we moved so hard and fast during the day. And now we have the night to conceal us."

"When do we get to Jubail?" Dain asked.

"If we can continue at this pace," Maiyidh said, "and if the camels hold out, then we should be there late tomorrow—*Insha'llah.*"

"But the sand truck should catch us early tomorrow."

"Yes, it should," Maiyidh said. "I'm surprised it hasn't come before now. But perhaps they had a bad Murra tracker, or perhaps something went wrong with the motor of their truck."

"Perhaps a few stray bullets hit it during the fight," Jabir suggested. "There might be no one at all chasing us!"

"I know we are being followed," Maiyidh said.

"How do you know? How can you possibly tell?"

"I simply know, I cannot explain how. A true Arab of the desert feels these things in his bones. It is an intuition that has allowed the *Arab al 'ariba* to exist in a bleak and hostile land where every man's hand is turned against his neighbor."

"It is nothing more than a superstition," Jabir said.

"I would not expect a man of the city to understand this, or any other true thing," Maiyidh said. "Look, we have slowed down. Strike your beast, Jabir and Dain, for the pace must be maintained."

Dain experienced the rest of the night as a series of nightmares interrupted only by the agony of his weary body and dulled mind. He had no trouble with his camel; the beast followed Maiyidh, who, apparently made of iron and rawhide, led the group and set the pace. Dain had nothing to do but hold on to the headrope and pommel, and dream wide awake in the saddle.

He found himself obsessed with the absurd but irresistible notion that a star was going to drop out of the sky and hit him on the head. No knowledge of astronomy helped to dispel this fear. At other times he imagined that a great wall of granite had loomed up suddenly ten feet in front of his camel's head, and that unless he swerved very suddenly he would be thrown against it. And at other times he thought he saw the ground opening just in front of him, into a bog, a quagmire, a precipice. But when the hallucination had passed, he found himself in a reality as bad as the nightmare—a reality of himself sitting with deadened legs upon an ungainly half-dead monster; of himself breathing icy air and dust into wearily pumping lungs; of himself with a throat as raw as a file, and with dimmed aching eyes staring across an unchanging lunar landscape.

The hours passed, the sliver of new moon went down below the horizon, and the agonies of heat gave way to the agonies of cold. An icy-cold shamal started to blow—now, of all times. It swept down from the northeast, from the Central Asian highlands and it cut through their thin clothes like a knife.

They kept on going, plodding more often than trotting. And then someone called softly, "Wait."

They all pulled up. The man who had spoken was Muhammed ibn Hissa, the rafiq who had come along to take them through the Bani Khalid lands. He was a short, sour-faced man, his cheeks pitted with smallpox scars. This was the first time Dain could remember him speaking.

"Listen," Muhammed said.

Maiyidh had come back from the head of the column. He stood up on his saddle now. He looked at Muhammed, who jerked his head toward the west. Maiyidh whispered to the others to be silent; then he cocked his head high in the air, and concentrated.

Minutes passed. Dain heard nothing but the wind, and the forlorn panting of the camels. But presently Maiyidh got down from his saddle and said to Muhammed, "Yes, it is the sand truck."

"I thought perhaps it was," Muhammed said.

"It is presently west and north of us, wouldn't you say?"

Muhammed nodded.

"And they are traveling northwest."

"I believe so," Muhammed said.

Jabir said, "Are you sure you two aren't dreaming all this? I still can't hear anything."

"That is because your ears are trained only for the sounds of city traffic," Maiyidh explained. "Subtler noises escape you. Can you hear the truck, Dain?"

"No," Dain said. "But I think we'd see their headlights long before we heard any noise."

"Headlights?" Maiyidh said in astonishment. "They don't use headlights at night on the desert. Not when they're chasing someone. Besides, why should they bother when they have a Murri with them, whose eyes can pierce the deepest gloom?"

Maiyidh turned back to Muhammed. "Do you know the water hole near here called Awaina?"

"Yes. But I heard that it failed this summer."

"It did fail, and if you know about it the Saudis know it also, and they won't bother looking for us there. Let me think a moment."

Maiyidh put both hands over his eyes and concentrated. Then he said, "By God! If we have read their direction correctly, they are going to the settlement of Thaj!"

"Or perhaps to Hinnat," Muhammed suggested.

"Yes, and then perhaps they will go to Nata!" He broke into laughter, and Muhammed chuckled softly.

"What in hell do you find so funny?" Dain asked.

"The Saudis!" Maiyidh said. "I find the Saudis funny! You see, what must have happened is this: they set out with their Murra tracker and he did very well, reading the signs by day and night and bringing the soldiers to within a few miles of us. But the Saudis, you see, are not really nomads any longer, and they don't believe in the old ways. They are half and half, neither of the old world nor of the new. So the sergeant must have gotten tired of the Murri sniffing around the ground and looking at every mark in the sand. He must have gotten impatient and bored, and perhaps even a little thirsty. And so he said, 'Come, these fugitives didn't have enough water for a forced march to the coast, and their camels were tired even before they began, and the Awaina water hole is dry. Therefore they must have taken refuge in a settlement, and the only settlements in this entire area are Thaj and Hinnat, or possibly Nata. So enough of this tiresome tracking; let us go to the villages and flush them out!' "

Muhammed chuckled again. Dain said, "What happens when they don't find us in those villages?"

"Then they curse us for a while," Maiyidh said, "and then they apologize to their tracker—otherwise he will never work for them again—and then, quite humbly, they ask his advice."

"And what does he tell them?"

"He will say to them that further tracking is now unnecessary. From the last signs he read, which were somewhere south of Thaj, our only possible destination could be Jubail. Either you will find them in Jubail, he will tell them, or you will find them dead in the desert nearby to Jubail, with the hyenas eating away at their bones."

"So their mistake really hasn't helped us at all," Jabir said.

"It has helped us immeasurably," Maiyidh assured him. "Before, our position was hopeless, except for a miracle. Now we have been granted a miracle of stupidity, and we can gain perhaps a half-day; more, if the sergeant persists in searching beyond Hinnat."

"Is half a day enough?" Dain asked.

"Well, it's *almost* enough," Maiyidh said. "We need a little more time than that, to be completely truthful about it. But in any event, another half-day of life is not to be despised."

"Wait," Dain said, "I think . . . Yes, I can hear the truck now, very faintly above the wind. Can you hear it, Jabir?"

"Faintly, very faintly," Jabir said, giving Dain the satisfaction of hearing him lie.

"Mount!" Maiyidh cried. "There is hope now, brothers, so stay in your saddles a little longer and be tender to your camels!"

The Rakkans cursed him under their breath, but they mounted and followed him—just south of west, toward Jubail al Bahri on the Hasa coast.

Chapter 16

The Seventh Day

Morning brought the fierce sun; it struck like a madman, whipping their backs with cruel and heavy blows, like Shaitan-al-Kabir, the Great Devil himself. It beat down upon the agonized camels with an insensate and entirely personal anger. As it climbed it increased in fury, until the rifles and the inlaid iron stripping of the pommels were too hot to touch. Last night's shamal had failed by dawn, and no breath of air stirred.

Maiyidh, with sunken face and red-rimmed eyes, told Dain that this was a very fair foretaste of the climate of hell.

One of the Rakkans cried out that he saw three or four black dots moving across the desert behind them. Maiyidh studied them with some care, then managed to produce a laugh.

"What are they?" Dain asked.

"Hyenas," Maiyidh said. "They can smell death from afar, and they are following us, waiting for carrion."

Overhead, a single vulture soared on the invisible wind. He was also waiting, Maiyidh told Dain, and he would beat the hyenas to the kill—though not for long.

No one talked any more. They rode, swaying in the saddle with exhaustion. They rode past a little wadi, and one of the Rakkans fainted, suddenly and without warning, falling head-first onto the hard-packed sand.

Maiyidh halted the party, poured a little water down the man's throat, and slapped his face in an attempt to revive him. The man did not move, and his breathing was stertorous. Maiyidh wasted no more time with him. He tied the unconscious man across his camel and set off again.

Midday passed, and the desert stretched on endlessly before them. One of the camels—a light-colored fawn beast with a docile, pleasing disposition (for a camel)—began to cough repeatedly. Maiyidh listened carefully, and seemed to be worried for the first time.

"This is very bad," he told Dain. "We can get by without men, but we must have the camels."

"How sick is she?" Dain asked.

"Very sick indeed. For one thing, she has reached the limit of her endurance. For another, she sounds as if she has had a sudden attack of *manhus*, a disease that attacks the lungs. But I hope it is not that, for the disease is very contagious and the other camels might have it, too."

"Will she live?"

"No."

"How much longer has she got?"

"Watch for yourself and see. You won't have long to wait."

They were going up a small hill, and the fawn camel coughed like a man in the last stages of tuberculosis. They reached the top and started down, and the fawn camel gave three sharp coughs like three rifle shots; then, without warning, she collapsed.

"That is how camels go," Maiyidh said when they had halted.

"It is always the way," said Muhammed ibn Hissa, the Khalidi rafiq. "A camel gives you no warning, or very little. She seems as if she can go on forever, but when she has reached her preordained point of exhaustion she falls down suddenly and dies."

"You think it was exhaustion, then, and not *al manhus?*"

"So I believe. It came upon her too suddenly for it to be the lung disease. Should we hide her body beneath the sand, Maiyidh?"

"No need. If the Saudis have indeed gone to Thaj, they will not return this way. And even if they do, we will be out of their grasp—or dead."

"Yes, I agree," Muhammed said. "Someone else will have to ride double."

"True," Maiyidh said. He looked over the group and called out, "You, Ali, mount behind Mubarak. Since he's unconscious, you can pretend he's a saddle pack."

They mounted and rode on, down a sandy ridge and onto a granite plain strewn with great boulders. The plain had a very gentle rise, but the camels puffed and labored up it as if they were climbing the jagged mountains of Akhdar. The men of the party were not in much better shape than their beasts. The Rakkans had given up any pretense at riding; they lay with closed eyes across their camels, with one arm around

their beast's neck and the other around the pommel. Muhammed ibn Hissa, sole upholder of his tribe's honor, sat nearly as upright as he had begun, showing his fatigue only by an occasional sideways lurch, at which time he would grab the pommel and straighten up, looking faintly ashamed.

Maiyidh, desert-bred like Muhammed, but tougher and more wiry, sat firmly and correctly, with the headrope held lightly in his hand. He showed no discomfort; but as much of his face as could be seen past the khaffiyah was sunburnt several shades darker than his normal dark coloring, and his eyes glittered behind puffed red slits.

Dain had been in several deserts before, but never on a forced march and never on a camel. He was hampered by his lack of experience, but aided by his excellent physique, which, in turn, was the result of an infinitely better diet and medical care than any Bedouin or Rakkan townsman could hope to get. Health won out in this contest with experience; and Dain, though as exhausted as he had ever been in his life, was able to sit his camel almost as well as Maiyidh, and to keep some vestige of energy still in reserve.

Jabir was in an unhappy situation; an Arab, but not of the deserts; well-fed and cared for during his life, but not well enough by Western standards. He was still better off than the Rakkans, some of whom had lived a lifetime on dates, rice, leben, and a meat meal three or four times a year. He was better off, but not much better off. Nevertheless he kept himself upright in the saddle through sheer pride. He rode a few paces behind Dain, and he kept his eyes fixed on Dain's back. As long as Dain stayed upright, Jabir would also, or he would die trying.

The unsung hero of the group was Turki ibn Badr, the Rakkan townsman who had been shot in the thigh during the charge against the Saudis. His wound was not at all serious —if he had been lying in a hospital bed instead of across the back of a camel. On a forced march it was serious enough. Nevertheless he kept pace with the others, stopped the flow of his blood with various filthy rags, and said not one word of complaint.

Midday passed, and the afternoon went on with a terrible slowness, like a limping old torturer. At noon the camels had fallen to a slow, labored trot; now they could not be prodded any faster than a walk.

The hyenas had moved in closer to the party. They were within easy rifle range, but they seemed to know that nobody was going to bother shooting them.

The vulture still soared overhead. Another vulture had joined him, and the two sailed easily on the still air, their wings barely moving. Like the hyenas, they also were within easy rifle range, but nobody wanted to use up the energy to shoot them. If the Rakkans were going to kill anyone it would be Maiyidh, who had led them into this wilderness and was now undoubtedly lost. They would also not have minded killing the American, who was probably behind this whole crazy suicidal scheme. And if they killed those two, they might as well shoot the Khalidi as well, just for the hell of it, and because he was a stranger and a proud Bedouin who thought he was better than townsmen.

No one was going to waste the energy on murder; but several of the Rakkans kept themselves going by dreaming about it.

Since all good things must come to an end, so must all bad things. In the late afternoon Maiyidh looked at three flat-topped hills to the north, and a U-shaped wadi to the south. He sat high in the saddle and stared ahead, pulling his eyes open with both hands.

The others stopped and waited, not daring to hope. Maiyidh stared for a long time, scanning north and south along the horizon. Then he sat back in his saddle with an angry grimace.

"It seems that I have made a mistake," he told Dain.

"You mean that we're not where you thought we'd be?"

"That is exactly what I mean," Maiyidh said, his face a study in dejection. "What a fool I am! How could I, a full-blooded Azmi, have made such a stupid error?"

The Rakkans were all listening intently. One or two of them were fingering the bolts of their rifles.

"Not where we ought to be!" Jabir said, dredging up anger from some hidden source. "O clever Azmi, you mean to say that you are lost?"

Dain noticed that Muhammed ibn Hissa seemed thoroughly unconcerned. In fact, the Khalidi was barely able to restrain a grin.

"Lost?" Maiyidh said. "No, O Jabir, I do *not* mean that we are lost. I simply mean that we are not where we ought to be."

"Then kindly explain where we are," Jabir said, in a voice that sounded like one dull sword grating against another.

"I *thought* we would come out more to the south," Maiyidh said. "But I erred, though I cannot understand why. Still, there is Jubail al Bahri, straight ahead of us and slightly to the right, a distance from here of less than three miles.

"You mean we have arrived?" Jabir said.

"Of course we have arrived," Maiyidh said. "But what I said before is still true; we are not where we ought to be. The place where we should at this moment according to my calculations be is *there*."

And Maiyidh pointed at a patch of rock exactly like any other patch of rock in the desert, and approximately fifty yards from where the party was standing.

Muhammed the Khalidi was unable to contain himself any longer at the beauty of the joke. In spite of his fatigue, he laughed like a wolf, slapped himself on the chest, threw his rifle in the air and caught it. Then he put on a sober face.

"That is very like an Azmi," he said to Jabir. "Men of the 'Awazim never know where they're going, and the proof of it is in his very words!"

Jabir asked, "Are you really, completely sure that we are at Jubail?"

"Look for yourself," Maiyidh said. "Look at the horizon in front of you and just a little to the right. Yes, like that. You can just see the top of the water tower."

Jabir saw it and nodded. He swallowed his anger and rose to the occasion.

"Yes," he said, "I do indeed see it. You have accomplished the impossible, Maiyidh, and you are a man indeed, and a man that the 'Awazim should be proud to possess."

The Rakkans managed to raise a cheer for Maiyidh, not vigorous but very deeply felt. Dain congratulated him. Muhammed the Khalidi looked on, nodded and grinned. "Well done, Azmi," he said, in a rather perfunctory manner. He knew that he could have done equally well himself.

They started again, guided by the water tower. The sight of it had put new life into the men, and even the camels seemed to know that the end of the journey was in sight. They allowed themselves to be pushed to a trot.

"We've not only gotten here more or less in one piece," Dain said, "but we seem to have beaten the sand truck."

"So it would seem," Maiyidh said. "But then again, perhaps

not. The Saudis could have gone from Thaj straight to the new coast road, and then south into Jubail, where they might already be waiting for us. Or they could have doubled back when they didn't find us in any of the villages, and be coming up behind us now. All we can know is that the truck is not in sight—at this moment. But it will come, if I know anything of Saudis."

He turned and shouted to the Rakkans: "O you men! At least one of you must keep watch to the rear at all times. At every moment of the time, do you hear me? And keep your rifles ready."

Chapter 17

The men of the Saudi patrol were thorough, dedicated, tenacious, and skilled in Western patrolling methods. The sergeant was the epitome of all these virtues. He had been born and raised in Jidda. Poor, detribalized, without connections in the proper places, he had joined Sa'ud's army and had worked very hard indeed. His ability to adopt and assimilate new ways had overcome the deficits of his position. He had risen in rank through sheer merit, had voluntarily and enthusiastically undergone modern military training by foreign instructors, and soon he would take even more training and become an officer.

He was a self-made man, and he had forged his own character on the anvil of his determination. It was only natural that he approved of himself and disapproved of any other kind of man. He didn't like influence-seekers, since he had no influence himself. He had the cityman's distrust of the nomad; and, coming of a poverty-stricken family with only the vaguest antecedents, he had a deep-seated hatred for any desert tribe which considered itself noble.

The Murra guide he had been assigned was a tall and stately wild man from the Dahana desert just above the Rub' al Khali. The Murri could neither read nor write, and had only the vaguest of false ideas about countries beyond southern Arabia. The Murri had heard of Africa, America, Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and India, but he had only a sketchy idea of their respective sizes and locations. His ignorance in these matters didn't bother him in the slightest, for he *did* know nearly everything worth knowing about the eastern Arabia peninsula, from the Hadhramaut in the deep south to An Nafud in the north. In addition, he had learned the Koran by rote, and he knew everything about the great Al Murra tribe, and he knew his own genealogy to the seventh generation and was fond of reciting it when a suitable occasion arose, or even if one didn't arise.

The sergeant detested him, and lived only for the day when

he would become an officer and not have to deal directly with savages.

Grudgingly, the sergeant had allowed the Murri to guide them across the desert west of Summan, and with impatience and annoyance he had watched the snake-haired Murri sniff around sand and rock with the impressive exaggerated gestures of a charlatan. This sort of tracking slowed down the sand truck's progress, of course; but time was of no concern to the Murri. He personally had all the time in the world; and more important, he had his own, his family's, and his tribe's reputation to uphold. That called for painstaking judgment, which required the consumption of time.

The sergeant let him have it his own way for the first hundred miles; but he became increasingly annoyed at the Murri's slow, ponderous pronouncements on scraps of old leather, bits of faded cloth, camel droppings, camel footprints ("No, *those* are not footprints of the men we seek; *these* footprints were made by Batiniyah camels from the Batinah coast. One of the camels had a lame right foreleg. My great-grandfather, the noble Wadha al Amash, frequently used to say . . .").

After a hundred miles of enforced proximity with the Murri, the sergeant's detestation turned to a deep and all-abiding hatred. And with hatred came a mistrust of the man's abilities.

Camel droppings, nondescript scraps of sun-dried leather that could have been left by anyone! The sergeant had undergone a brief but very scientific training from a German officer, a desert man himself, formerly with the great Rommel in the Afrika Corps. The German had talked of the beautiful art of strategy, of the disposition of tanks on the desert, of lines of communication, sources of supply, operational bases. . . .

An operational base! Yes, the fugitives needed that; even the execrable Murri had spoken of the decrepit state of their camels. The fugitives had been surprised, had fought, and fled with no chance to prepare for a desert journey. Would they attempt to reach the coast without a stop? Unlikely; they probably wouldn't even try it. They needed a *base of operations*, if only for a few hours' respite and resupply.

The sergeant consulted his map and came to a decision. "We go to the village of Thaj," he told the driver. "Steer by the compass until you are absolutely sure of your landmarks. Thaj lies northwest of here, so a course of forty-five degrees ought to do it."

"But they have gone northeast," the Murri protested. "The

signs tell me that they have gone to the east, and to a little south of east."

"You know signs and footprints," the sergeant said, "but I know something about the endurance of men, especially men who have not been bred to the wastelands like the noble Al Murra. Driver, proceed to Thaj as fast as you can without breaking an axle."

There were many things the Murri might have said, some of which might have had some influence on the sergeant; but the Murri was a proud man and his feelings had been hurt. So he sat in the back of the truck in stately silence. Let the sergeant find out for himself: there is no speaking to those who will not hear, as his paternal great-great-grandfather had been quoted as saying.

The sergeant searched Thaj and questioned the frightened inhabitants. Finding nothing, he drove like a whirlwind to Hinnat. With a face like a thundercloud, he searched the village, and once more found nothing. But the townsmen were so frightened of him, and so evasive, that he felt certain that the fugitives had come through.

He left for Nata at once, ill-tempered and doubly sure that he had made the right decision. The townsmen of Hinnat watched him go with an overwhelming sense of relief. They had thought he was another of Sa'ud's special tax-collectors.

In Nata the sergeant became even angrier than before, and the townsmen appeared even more evasive than the ones at Hinnat. Finding nothing, he pulled one man out of the crowd —a man whose fear seemed greater than the others, and who had shifty, close-set eyes and a foxy face. The sergeant commandeered a house and took the man inside for a little talk. He took a camel stick with him, just in case the man needed a little loosening up.

The man had stolen an arm bangle in Sarrar two years ago, and he thought that the all-seeing authorities had finally caught up with him. It had been the stupid act of a lovesick youth, but it could mean the loss of his right hand to the executioner at Riyadh. Upon learning what the sergeant wanted, the thief was relieved and grateful to God, and he listened to the sergeant carefully and told him exactly what he wanted to hear.

The sergeant stamped out of the house and told his men: "It is as I thought. From a distance of several miles this man saw a party of approximately twelve men on camels. He

thought they were 'Ajman raiders. He hid, but he watched them for as long as they were in sight, and saw that they were traveling almost due east, or a little north of east. This means that the bastards are riding to Abu Hadriyah, where a boat is probably waiting for them somewhere on the coast."

"But it cannot be!" the Murri said, speaking for the first time in fourteen hours. "Abu Hadriyah is in the wrong direction, north on the coast rather than south. All the signs—"

"Spare me any further repetition of your lore," the sergeant said. "You saw footprints and camel turds; that villager saw *twelve men on camels*, riding hard toward the coast. We go to Abu Hadriyah, driver, and fast."

(The thief had learned easily enough from the sergeant what number of men had been required. He had supplied it willingly; but he thought that now it might be a good idea for him to make a trip to Kuwait.)

"You can see what must have happened," the sergeant told the Murri. "They must have gotten supplies and fresh mounts from those lying seditious villagers of Thaj or Hinnat. I shall have a little talk with them after I have taken the fugitives."

The Murri sat with folded arms and an immobile face. He had the gift of silence. He didn't speak again for the rest of the day.

Chapter 18

The Eighth and Ninth Days

Through the mercy of a desert God and the obduracy of a Jiddan sergeant, Dain's party reached the outskirts of Jubail without a patrol car thundering down upon them. They didn't dare enter the town in daylight, for they had to assume that orders for their arrest had been telegraphed to all of the towns on the Hasa coast. So they waited in an abandoned limestone quarry until after sunset, gambling that the patrol truck, so long delayed, would be delayed a little longer.

After sunset they slaughtered all the camels, and ate one which Maiyidah and Muhammed thought would be the tenderest. The roasted meat had the consistency of cordovan, Dain decided, but was not quite as tasty. He wolfed it down anyhow.

They drank up their remaining water and then buried the camels, canteens, water bags, riding sticks, and all the rest of their equipment. It had to be done: the police were looking for a group of ten or twelve mounted men, which they would now never find. They wouldn't even find a group, since the men planned to enter the town by twos and threes.

Dain insisted that the rifles also had to be buried, and Maiyidh reluctantly agreed. He told the men that rifles were no more allowed in Jubail than they were in Rakka; that the police, who sometimes turned a blind eye to this law, would not do so now while they were looking for fugitives; and that in any event, rifles would be useless against a police force armed with automatic weapons.

It went hard with the men, who had come to think of their rifles as talismans of luck. It felt good just to hold a rifle in your hands, and they put their weapons under the sand with great sadness, as if they were burying a dear friend. All of them except Muhammed ibn Hissa.

The rafiq of the Bani Khalid, up to now the quietest and most agreeable of men, turned mule-stubborn. He refused, absolutely and categorically, to part with his rifle. He informed them that never, since he was a child, had he been

without a rifle in his hands, or (on his infrequent visits to town) hanging down his back under his cloak. Never! For the Bani Khalidi were a small tribe, he pointed out (though renowned fighters), and they were surrounded on three sides by stronger tribes—the Mutair, 'Awazim, and 'Ajman—and on the fourth side was nothing but the sea, and therefore they had to be prepared at all times and places and seasons to battle raiding parties out to steal their camels and sheep. And furthermore, his rifle was not just an ordinary rifle, not just a Lee-Enfield such as most Bedouin carried. *His* rifle was a Mauser, which he had taken from an Ajman whom he had killed in a raid; and this Mauser was so marvelous that it almost aimed itself, and his possession of it brought him great prestige among his people.

He had a great deal more that he wanted to say about his rifle, but at last allowed Maiyidh to explain again why the rifle must not be carried into Jubail, not even under his cloak, not even stripped and hidden on his person. And Dain pressed enough money into the Khalidi's unwilling hands to buy three Mausers (though Muhammed only wanted to keep his own personal Mauser). And Maiyidh then invoked the traditional laws governing the conduct of a rafiq (which Muhammed said did not apply in this case) and also the law of qusara, which Muhammed had to admit did apply.

Muhammed stood silently for a moment with his rifle in one hand and Dain's money in the other. At last he thrust the silver riyals into his shirt, and with contorted face and trembling hands he buried his beloved Mauser. When he had finished, Maiyidh, with tears streaming from his eyes, came up and embraced the Khalidi and declared that henceforth and forever after Muhammed ibn Hissa was his friend and his brother, and that all of Maiyidh's possessions and all of his abilities were Hissa's to command. And Muhammed, also crying freely, made the same declaration.

Everyone was moved by the nobility and generosity of these two men, and no one could watch with dry eyes, except Dain and Jabir.

Ten minutes later, as tactfully as possible, Dain suggested that they had all better be on their way. Everyone agreed, though they didn't like to see a scene as exquisitely emotional as this one brought to so abrupt an end.

Maiyidh knew the town of Jubail al Bahri well, since it was his tribe's main market place. He had friends living there, and

also relatives—two uncles, one first cousin, and three second cousins. These relatives were only Arabdar, to be sure, but they were of good 'Awazim blood and could be relied upon. And better yet, within the town he was safe from the blood-feud between his tribe's various sections.

Maiyidh took them to a palm grove just outside the town and went in alone. He returned in less than an hour, grinning, very pleased with himself.

"The best of good luck!" he told them. "My uncle Bandar, who loves me like a son, returned just five days ago from a business trip to Misha'ab. He is an influential man with many friends, and he will hide us and feed us and seek out a means for us to reach Qatar. And he does all of this out of love for me, though you should pay him a little something, Dain, a handful or two of riyals, just to show your appreciation."

"I'll pay," Dain said. "Is his house big enough for all of us?"

"Alas, no," Maiyidh said. "There are nine of us, and only a prince would have room enough for that number. He can accommodate four of us, however, and his brother can be prevailed upon to take three more, and one of my cousins will hide the last two. I think it will be safest if I take us to the proper abodes in three groups; and also, Dain, it would be appropriate if you also gave a little appreciation money to Bandar's brother, and to my cousin."

"Consider it done," Dain said grandly. After all, it was not his own money that was being spent. "But go easy on the costs, Maiyidh; we still have to reach Qatar. Did your uncle know if the police are looking for us?"

"He knew," Maiyidh said. "Most of the Hasa coast knows; and the Saudi policemen and soldiers are walking the streets of every town between Manifa and Dammam, peering into faces and asking stupid questions. But they will not peer into *our* faces, not when we go by the paths and alleys through which I will lead you. Now, Dain and Jabir and my beloved Muhammed ibn Hissa will be the first group. Come!"

The nine men were safely hidden away. Dain and Jabir shared a cellar storage room, and Maiyidh and Muhammed were in an unfinished attic room in Uncle Bandar's house. Three Rakkans were given refuge in a room behind a pantry in Bandar's brother's house, and the remaining two had to live in a chicken coop behind the hut of one of Maiyidh's cousins. The hiding places were none too secure, but the town of Jubail had already been searched once, and the police

patrolled the streets now in a perfunctory manner. They saw no reason to be overzealous; it had been reliably reported that the refugees were up the coast near Abu Hadriyah.

Now that the fugitives were in Jubail, it remained only to get them safely out again, onto a boat that would carry them away from Saudi Arabia. This proved difficult even in a good-sized port town like Jubail al Bahri. It was September 2nd, the height of the pearling season. Just about anything that could float—and a few things that could not—were out in the Persian Gulf with the pearling fleets. Boats too small to remain at sea with the fleets acted as water boats and food boats, and most of these were making their temporary base in ports higher up in the Gulf. It seemed as though nothing better than a rowboat could be had, and even rowboats were in short supply.

The hours dragged by slowly. Dain and Jabir played chess, talked, ate, drank, slept, and played endless more games of chess. Their refuge was cool and damp, a great relief after the burning desert. But strangely enough, the cellar didn't seem to agree with Jabir. Perhaps it was the dampness; he came down with headaches, then fever, then stomach cramps. A physician was called in, examined the patient and said that he might have tuberculosis; but then again he might not. Symptoms such as these were very general, and could also indicate the initial stages of cholera, amoebic dysentery, hepatitis, sand-fly fever, bubonic plague, or smallpox. Jabir sat up in bed, alarmed, but the doctor soothed him and said he was merely indicating what *might* be, as was his duty as a physician. In actuality, he thought it likely (though of course he could not guarantee it) that Jabir had fallen victim to one of the numerous ailments which were so prevalent on the Gulf Coast, and which were usually classified under the term "Gulf fever." The ailment could also be various other things, but the doctor was inclined to believe that it was Gulf fever.

"Is it a serious disease?" Jabir asked. "Am I likely to die?"

"No, no, not the slightest chance of it," the doctor said soothingly. "There is, of course, the ever-present possibility that your sickness could, by weakening you, render you susceptible to a more serious ailment. But that sort of thing doesn't happen too often, and you are a strongly built young man, and, in any event, these matters are in the hands of God."

"If I do have Gulf fever," Jabir said, "how long is it likely to remain with me?"

"That depends entirely upon what variety of Gulf fever

you are victim of," the doctor said. "There is three-day Gulf fever and seven-day Gulf fever, and ten-, twenty-, and thirty-day Gulf fever. We cannot know which variety you have until you have recovered, for certain sorts of prognostication are beyond even the most advanced medical skill. Just remain calm, young man, get plenty of rest, eat vegetables and milk only, and stay out of cold drafts. I will leave certain medicines which may be of some help. Good day, and allow me to wish you the very best of good luck."

Jabir found the doctor thoroughly unsatisfactory, even though he was reputed to be the best in all of Jubail. But he accepted what could not be averted with a fair show of stoicism, and Dain made him as comfortable as possible.

A ship was found at the end of their second day in Jubail, and the captain was brought in for an interview with Dain and Jabir. He was a sallow Persian from Bushire. He had dainty hands and feet attached to an oily, overweight body, and he looked a little like a starfish. Maiyidh brought him in, not bothering to hide his distaste; but that was mainly because the man was a Shi'ah Moslem rather than an orthodox Sunni, and also because he was a Persian of no known antecedents.

His name was Mirza Majid bin Sahil. He settled himself in the sturdiest chair in the room and adjusted his paunch. Earlier he had set his face into a conventional mask of desolation, and so he was ready to begin bargaining.

He began this by declaring that what Dain and the others desired was out of the question—unthinkable, impossible, dangerously illegal, and doubtless unprofitable. Then he sat back and waited.

Dain had no particular taste for the give-and-take of bartering; but when in Jubail one must do as the Jubailis do. So he leaned back, crossed his arms, and said, "I am sorry that you feel that way, Majid bin Sahil, but I would not wish you to do anything that might go against your desires. Therefore we will find transportation elsewhere."

Majid looked startled, and Maiyidh, standing behind him, nodded approvingly: this was a proper way to conduct business.

"It is good of you to consider my wishes," Majid said. "But unfortunately for you, there are no other boats of a suitable size to be had in Jubail. They are all up the coast with the pearling fleet, as I would be, too, had I not been struck by ill fortune. For you see, I was leaving the harbor some two

weeks ago when a moronic helmsman in a sambuq swung around unexpectedly to avoid some insignificant obstacle and rammed me amidships, stoving in a quantity of planking and almost causing me to lose a mast. The sambuq lost half her bow and sank on the spot, which was what she deserved. I barely got back into port, with my men pumping like furies. I ordered repairs at once—for I am the owner of my ship as well as naukhuda—and by a miracle they were completed just two days ago. You were fortunate even to find me, for I have just finished replenishing my stores and was planning to sail up the Gulf on the morning tide."

"I think," Maiyidh said, "that you are a little inaccurate in your appraisal of time. According to my Uncle Bandar, your ship was repaired and ready to sail six days ago, but your crew had deserted you for other ships, and you still don't have enough men to man her properly."

Majid bin Sahil gave Dain a melancholy smile. "What you say may be so. I am not a rich merchant who adds and subtracts his days and hours. I am a simple sailor, and not well versed in land matters. But what the excellent young man says about my men deserting me is true. Who can blame them? The pearling season is short, and a ship in port earns no money. But I have it on good authority that a trading baghala from Sind was wrecked against the headland at Ras at Tannura, and that the surviving Indian sailors, finding no work in Qatif, are even now on their way to Jubail. So you see, my problem will be soon solved."

Jabir groaned at the obviousness of the lie. Maiyidh coughed in order not to laugh. Dain said, "Indeed, that is most excellent for you, Majid bin Sahil. But the Indian sailors might go south to Dhahran, or they might delay for a week and drink up their wages in Qatif."

"True, true. Sailors are notoriously unreliable. Although I have heard that these particular men—"

"And against the uncertainty of their arrival, and the prospects of an unprofitable trip if they should arrive—since the pearling season is already well advanced—I can offer you nine able-bodied men to man your ship on a short and profitable trip. . . . If such a venture would not be displeasing to you."

"Nine men," Majid said thoughtfully. "But are any of them sailors?"

"No less than five of them have had plentiful experience

of the sea," Dain said. "For these five are of Rakka, a port city famous for its seagoing men. And in addition, my good friend Jabir, who at the moment has an upset stomach from eating too much roast lamb, has worked on various ships in the Red Sea and in the Gulf of Aden. I must confess that Maiyidh is thoroughly without experience, as is his friend Muhammed ibn Hissa. And I must be considered inexperienced, too, for I have never sailed in a Persian Gulf craft, though I do have some minor experience with wind-driven vessels in the Atlantic Ocean."

Dain had invented all this with a straight face, and Maiyidh somehow choked down his laughter. He didn't know about the others, but he knew that the five Rakkans were petty merchants or oil-field workers, and that their experience with water was confined exclusively to drinking it.

"Well, well," Majid said, "I am in a difficult situation. The trip that you wish to make could cause me a great deal of trouble with the authorities. But on the other hand, I have an idle ship which is earning no money at the height of the pearling season. I should be prudent. . . . And yet, I like the look and the sound of you, Mirza Dain, and that, to an impulsive nature like mine, comes before all other considerations. Therefore, yes! I will take you and your people to Qatar."

"When?" Dain asked.

"This very night, if you so desire it!"

"Mirza Majid bin Sahil, I do indeed desire it, and I thank you from the depths of my heart."

"It is nothing, nothing," Majid said. "When I like a man I like to do favors for him. In fact, it would be my highest joy if I could do this for nothing, for pure friendship's sake. But alas, I am a poor man, I have debts to be paid before I can set sail, and there are certain other necessary expenses. . . ."

The next half-hour was devoted to an earnest talk about money, conducted in the friendliest possible way. Majid named a sum; Dain could have chartered a freighter for the amount, and he offered one fourth of the asking price. It went back and forth, and it could have gone on for hours, even for days, but Dain didn't have the time. He settled finally for an exorbitant sum, leaving him not much for expenses in Doha.

Maiyidh thoroughly disapproved of the entire money transaction. Even though he understood the need for speed, his estimation of Dain fell slightly. ("A good man, but indecently wasteful," he told Muhammed Hissa later.)

All nine fugitives were aboard within two hours. Majid set out under light canvas (he hadn't believed a word Dain had told him about the Rakkan sailors), and by dawn they were well to sea, with Jubail al Bahri left behind them, the Arabian coast a low black line to starboard, and Bahrein and Qatar somewhere ahead.

Chapter 19

The Tenth Day

Majid's ship was of a type known as a kutiyah, built in India some nineteen years ago. She had a great cabin aft, two heavy masts, and a massive, nicely curved bow. She resembled an eighteenth-century English frigate except for her sailing qualities, which were inconsiderable.

Majid's kutiyah was slow to come about and intolerant of any head wind. She was sluggish and sullen, and her only good point was her stability. She was almost as stable as a log, which she sailed like.

The shamal failed soon after sunrise, and Majid coaxed his boat to within five miles of the coast in order to pick up the westerly land breeze. It blew strong and well, a beam wind that gave the kutiyah her best turn of speed. Dain and the other fugitives sweated at the sheets and halyards and stumbled over mounds of unfamiliar gear. They pumped out the continuously filling bilges, and did many other things which Majid said (with a little smile) were absolutely necessary.

By sunset they were off Bahrein, with Muharraq port in sight and the northernmost tip of Qatar about fifty miles to the southwest. Then the land breeze failed. The kutiyah rocked in the swells; and Jabir, who had recovered enough to stagger onto deck, declared that this stomach-wrenching motion would doubtless put the finishing touch to his mortality.

A breeze came up two hours later—a shamal, a foretaste of the northwest monsoon. The kutiyah, with wind on her beam, began to move again. If the wind held, Dain calculated, they should be at the northernmost coast of Qatar by morning, and into Doha harbor before nightfall.

Captain Majid agreed with him: this would indeed be the case—if everything went exactly as it ought to go.

"*But,* Mirza Dain," he said, "I would respectfully remind you that matters usually do not arrange themselves so nicely at sea, especially during the unsettled autumn season between the two monsoons. We are still having summer weather, and

that is very nice while it lasts. But I personally do not trust this wind we are sailing on; it is a nervous wind, you might have noticed, first swinging a few degrees to the south and then a few degrees to the north, back and forth like an old woman who cannot make up her mind."

"Yes, it's shifting around some," Dain said. "But it keeps coming, mainly from the northwest."

Majid nodded gloomily. "But it could change its mind at any time. And I do not like the other signs."

"What other signs?"

"Did you not notice—and you a sailor of the great Atlantic? There are clouds building to the south. Not very big clouds, I will admit, but wind clouds all the same. And within the last hour a cross sea has started to run from the east."

"What do you think will happen?"

"How can I tell what the winds of the heavens will do, or when? It could mean nothing, since the clouds could blow away and the cross sea could die down. But if the clouds continue to build, it could mean that a head wind is coming to us from the south, which would not be dangerous but which would stop us dead in our tracks and perhaps even blow us backward. And that cross sea is caused by an east wind somewhere behind it. If the sea continues to build from the east, we might be in for a sharki, or what the Arabs call a kaus."

"What *is* a sharki, or a kaus?" Dain asked.

"It is an east wind or a southeast wind," Majid said gloomily. "It would blow us directly toward the Qatar shore, the lee shore."

"That's where we want to go anyhow," Dain said.

"Yes, but we want to get there alive. If the kaus has any real force behind it, if for example it blew an easterly gale, it could drive us onto the coral reefs or the sandbars along the Qatar coast. In that event you and your companions would have to swim the last mile or so to shore—through breaking seas and over razor-sharp coral."

"Sounds unpleasant," Dain said. "Perhaps it won't happen, though."

"Perhaps it won't—*Insha'llah.*"

The shamal continued to hold, and by eleven in the evening they had rounded the northernmost point of the Qatar peninsula. The clouds to the south had begun to break up, but the easterly swell was more pronounced. Majid paced up and

down and conferred with the three men left of his original pearling crew. All of them looked unhappy, and they sniffed the wind and shook their heads gloomily. Maiyidh sat on a hatch amidships and ostentatiously cleaned his fingernails with the point of his knife. Jabir took a sudden turn for the worse, and Majid helped him into his own cabin.

When he returned, Majid walked up to Dain and said resolutely, "I do not like the feel of this weather. I have decided to take us out to sea until the wind makes up its mind."

"No," Dain said. "I'm in a hurry, and I want us to stay on this course."

Majid gave his melancholy little smile. "I can understand your feelings of disappointment, honored sir. But it cannot be helped; we must not be caught against a lee shore, we must have sea room, for the sake of our lives. Surely you can understand that, sir?"

"No," Dain said.

"Can you not, really? Still, I must give the order—"

"No," Dain said, his voice quiet and not unpleasant.

Majid looked pained. "Dear sir, even though you are my charterer and my dear guest, I am captain of this ship and my word is law. Therefore, with profound regrets—"

"Don't give the helmsman any order to stand out to sea," Dain said. "If you do, my dear Majid, it will force upon me the unpleasantness of slitting your belly open."

Majid stared at him, speechless. Dain was holding onto a bulwark for balance, and his free hand rested naturally in his belt, about three inches from the hilt of his thin-bladed khusa. There was nothing belligerent about his look, but there was something in it that made Majid uncomfortable.

Majid forced a laugh. "Indeed, sir, you are a fiery man, of a sort which I find admirable. But I think you are making a joke about the knife; and anyhow, you need me to bring the ship into port. So you see, it is a stalemate, and I will give my order."

"Do so by all means," Dain said, "and I'll carve your guts before you finish the sentence. As for needing you—well, Majid, you aren't indispensable, even on your own ship. Any one of your three crewmen could do the job. If they can't, I'll try it myself. We've already rounded the Qatar coast and we're coming down the eastern side of the peninsula. That should put us just above the headland of Ras Laffan and about

sixty miles from Doha—according to the chart in your cabin. The chart also tells me that Doha has a prominent lighthouse and a thorough buoy system. Given all that, I should be able to bring this scow in."

"This is insupportable!" Majid said.

"But you'll just have to try to support it. There are nine of us against four of you. You may have a few rifles tucked away somewhere, but you won't get the chance to use them. From this point on, I'm going to have a man sticking with each of your men. Got it?"

"Yes," said Majid wearily. "But I swear before God, the weather—"

"So keep that coastline in sight at all times—or you've had it."

"To hear is to obey," Majid said. His voice was nasty and spiteful, but Dain really couldn't blame him for that, under the circumstances.

The wind lost some of its force but continued to blow steady from the northwest. They rounded the Ras Laffan headland at 1:45, and Doha was no more than fifty miles away. Dain calculated that they should be in the city in time for a late breakfast if the wind didn't fail.

Majid hurried over to him just then. "Mister Dain!" he said. "We are in trouble!"

"What are you talking about?"

"What I am saying, most noble lord, is that you may indeed have powers over the sky, causing it to blow a shamal when it should by every indication have veered into a kaus; but apparently your powers do not extend to the ship itself."

"You'll have to make it a little clearer," Dain said.

"Is this clear enough for you? My ship is sinking."

Dain said, "Look, if you're trying to pull something—"

"She is sinking, I tell you!" There was a perverse satisfaction in Majid's voice. "Come to the cargo hold with me and see for yourself. And bring your knife if you are fearful."

In the cargo hold, by the yellow glow of a primus lantern, Dain wasn't even able to see the floorboards. There was four feet of water in the hold, and three of Majid's four sailors, helped by their Rakkan guards, were pumping hard.

"How did it happen?" Dain asked.

"How should I know?" Majid replied. "I am not a man of superhuman knowledge, such as yourself; I am a mere sailor with a sinking ship. I suppose those bastards in Jubail made their repairs with unseasoned wood, or they didn't caulk

properly, or a bolt let go somewhere in the keel. I won't know until I've hauled her."

"Can we make it to Doha? It's only about fifty miles."

"Not possibly," Majid said. "Even with six men pumping, the water is rising a foot an hour. You can ask your own men if that isn't true."

Dain did ask them, and they confirmed the rate. "So what would you want to do, Captain?" Dain asked.

"Ah, in the moment of danger you suddenly make me captain again!" Majid said. "If the ship weren't mine I'd let her sink just for the satisfaction of seeing you drown. But she *is* mine, and I have a wife and a family to support. . . . We must make for the nearest port at once. That will be Shaqiq, a mile or so to the west on the Qatar peninsula. It is a mere forty miles from your destination, Mr. Dain, and so should not inconvenience you greatly."

"Okay," Dain said, "let's get on with it."

They came up to the deck and Majid bellowed his orders to the helmsman. "I am going to put her onto the beach," he told Dain. "There is a good beach at Shaqiq; I've used it before to scrape barnacles off my hull. If the wind holds, and if the leak doesn't worsen, and if God allows, I will have her beached within the hour."

All of these imponderables held true, and at 3 A.M. Majid put his ship on the beach. The kutiyah slid onto the sloping sand, gradually lost way and heeled down on her rounded side. Dain and his party were able to walk off without getting their feet wet.

Shaqiq was about five hundred yards away, and Dain and his party started walking across hard-packed sand, then onto rock, and then onto a footpath between tall 'arfaj bushes. Jabir gradually fell behind. He slipped and would have fallen if Dain hadn't caught him.

"I have never really been sick before," he told Dain, "except once when I was vacationing in Europe and caught dysentery."

"There'll be a doctor in Shaqiq," Dain said, "and there's a British hospital in Doha. Don't worry, you're going to be fine."

"Yes. . . . Come, we must catch up with the others."

Jabir walked, wincing with pain, and Dain supported him around the waist. The rest of the party was about thirty yards ahead of them, their light garments barely visible in the darkness.

Dain stopped suddenly. "Did you hear that? That rustling noise in the bushes?"

"No, I heard nothing, and I am completely uninterested anyhow," Jabir said. "It's probably a goat or a dog or a stray camel, and I want to get to a competent doctor."

His knees started to sag and Dain had to strain to hold him up. "Jabir?" Dain's voice was anxious. "Can you hold out a little longer?" Jabir didn't answer. He had gone limp, and he seemed to weigh a thousand pounds.

Then Dain heard the noise again. But now it was no longer in the bushes, it was directly on the path behind him.

He dropped Jabir, ducked, and spun around, his knife already half out of his waistband.

He managed to make three-quarters of a turn before something crashed into his skull and he lost consciousness.

Chapter 20

The Eleventh Day

Someone was shaking his foot, and a voice was saying quietly, "Mr. Dain, I think you should wake up now."

Dain opened his eyes and sat up, wincing. He had a really spectacular headache. He was in a large room with white-washed mud walls, sitting on a lumpy divan covered in an ugly flowered Indian cotton. There was the inevitable Arab coffee equipment: also a low table of dark wood, a brass tray into which an intricate design of interlocking circles and arabesques had been hammered, an incense burner hanging from a hook in the high domed ceiling, and—grotesquely—an American bureau, Grand Rapids style, of unpainted white pine.

The man who had awakened him was seated in a straight-backed chair about a yard from the end of the divan, well out of range of a possible kick from Dain. He was a slender Arab with large, melancholy brown eyes and a carefully trimmed beard. He was seated at his ease, his hands folded quietly in his lap. He had an uncanny boneless ability of being able to lounge even in a straight-backed chair.

"All right, so who the hell are you?" Dain asked.

"Many of my friends call me Hakim," the Arab said. "I hope that you too will call me Hakim."

"Sure, Hakim," Dain said. He sat up slowly and felt radiated pain from his headache pulse through his shoulders and neck. He rested his feet on the floor but made no attempt to stand up. Sitting, he was about five feet from Hakim. His knife was gone, but he thought that, even in his present state, he should be able to break this Hakim in half.

He was sure of it. And he was equally sure that Hakim had a gun somewhere within easy reach; a snub-nosed little belly gun, say. Even if Hakim were a dead-slow draw—which he probably was not—he could draw and fire in half the time it would take Dain to get off that soft, clinging divan and cover the necessary five feet.

Of course, if it became necessary, there might be other ways, other opportunities. . . .

Dain said, "I've got your name and presumably you've got mine. Would you mind telling me why you hit me over the head and brought me here?"

"You have probably figured it out for yourself by now," Hakim said. "We work for different people. You for the Rakkans, I for the Iraqis. You have a message of some importance to deliver by a certain date; I have the job of preventing you from doing that."

"What do you plan to do with me?"

"I have just told you. I intend you no physical harm, Mr. Dain. It would be unnecessary and sadistic in the present situation. Nor do I wish to know what the message is, nor who your friends and associates are. You would simply lie if I asked you; and then, under torture, you would give me a plausible cover story, and if I persisted, you might well have another cover story behind the first one."

"You're a very logical fellow," Dain said.

"I try to be rational. My job is to detain you until a certain date has passed. If that called for killing, be assured that I would do it. But it does not. It merely calls for house arrest."

"Very logical, very rational," Dain said. "How long are you planning to keep me here?"

"It is now seven-thirty in the morning, since you have been unconscious nearly four hours. I shall keep you here for two days and nights, thus ensuring the failure of the mission. I may have to keep you a third day, just to be on the safe side. But after that, you will be entirely free to leave."

"What about Maiyidh and Jabir? What about the rest of my party?"

"All are quite well and safe," Hakim assured him. "Maiyidh and the other Rakkans are no longer in Qatar. My men took them last night, just before they reached the town. We drugged them and bribed the captain of a baghala to carry them to Oman."

"That shows a good deal of foresight," Dain commented.

Hakim smiled ruefully. "Not that particular action. I had planned originally to keep them captive here in the house with you; but frankly, I was not happy about having nine men on my hands. The baghala was leaving port tonight anyhow, and I seized upon the convenience. If that baghala had been going north, your Rakkan friends would have ended up in a jail in

Iraq, where they belong. But I had to take what was convenient. Your friends will wake up in about twelve to fourteen hours and the next day they will find themselves in Ras al Khaima in Oman. It is a long way from their home, but the return shouldn't be too difficult for resourceful men."

"I wish I'd had a chance to say good-bye to Maiyidh," Dain said.

"I'm sorry I was not able to arrange that. But the one named Jabir is here in a room upstairs. He was unconscious even before I struck you, and I feared he might not survive a rough sea journey. He cannot be allowed to see a physician just yet, I regret to say; but fortunately I have a slight knowledge of these matters. He seems to have a mild case of food poisoning. Complete rest and a bland diet are what I have prescribed."

"And Majid and his men?"

"Obviously they were not your accomplices, except unwillingly. I have treated Majid in much the same manner that you found so effective—bribes and threats, the carrot and the stick. I have provided the means whereby he and his men can repair their ship, and I have promised more, besides. But that is only if they obey my orders to stay away from the town and to talk to no one. A few of my men, armed, are posing as part of the crew. They will send away any of the local townspeople who might come to the kutiyah. It is not really a matter of importance; Majid probably knows nothing of your plans. But I thought it a reasonable safeguard."

"You've really done a busy night's work," Dain said. "But what are you telling the local inhabitants?"

"I am telling them that I am settling an old blood-feud."

"Even old blood-feuds are against the law in Qatar."

"They are forbidden, but not disapproved of. Shaqiq is an extremely small town in a tiny country. Shaqiq is only forty miles from Doha, but it might as well be four hundred or four thousand miles, as far as these people are concerned. There are only one or two officials here, and a few hundred permanent inhabitants, and they don't often get to see more than a handful of rupees in a year, if that much. In such a situation it is easy enough to perform certain acts which the Qataris call hospitality, and which you and I call bribery."

"All very nice," Dain said. "But now, would you mind telling me how you happened to be here, in the right place and at the right time?"

"That will have to remain my little secret," Hakim said.

He got to his feet, and Dain saw that he was holding a tiny two-shot derringer almost hidden in his hand.

"Now I have certain other things to do," Hakim said. "Therefore, regretfully, I take my leave of you for the time being. Let me congratulate you on your own resourcefulness. You got away from Iraqi special police in their own territory, and from Saudi soldiers in theirs. You made a difficult journey of six hundred miles under the worst of conditions. That is no mean feat, Mr. Dain."

"Thanks, Hakim. But the six hundred miles doesn't count, you know, if you can't complete the last forty."

"Sadly true. Now, Mr. Dain, this is your room. Make yourself completely at your ease. You may have noticed that there is only one window—twelve feet up, nearly at ceiling level. A man with a rifle will watch you at all times through that window. He has orders to shoot if you attempt to escape; and I have promised to shoot *him* if you do escape A pleasant day to you, Mr. Dain."

And with a slight bow, Hakim left the room.

The day advanced. The guard sat watching through the window, his rifle ready, nervously noting every move Dain made. He seemed to fear that Dain might be a magician—that he could break down a concrete wall or slip through a rat-sized keyhole.

Dain wasn't a magician. There was nothing he could do; therefore he did nothing.

At noon a lunch was brought for him, and the guard was changed. In the evening a dinner was brought, and the first guard came back on.

Dain paced, dozed, and tried not to think. He had only one night and one day left in which to give Hassan's message to the Committee. It didn't look as if he was going to make it.

On Hakim's orders, the lights were kept on during the night. Dain lay on the divan and stopped trying not to think. There seemed no way out of this; nevertheless, he decided that he had to try. There were too many lives at stake for him not to try. His best plan, he decided, was to portray resignation; to play a role in which he submitted to his defeat. That role had to be played foi Hakim, of course, and it had to be played well. If he could bring it off, it should dull the edge of Hakim's alertness. Then he would tackle him, get his hands on him before Hakim could get that little derringer out, use his body as a shield so that the guard wouldn't shoot. . . .

It would never work. But Dain decided to try it in the morning. He could see no other way.

Another way presented itself, however. Hakim came into his room in the morning, smiling ruefully, his derringer nowhere in sight.

"Mr. Dain," he said, "it seems that I have made a slight miscalculation."

"How?" Dain asked.

"My estimation of the political situation down here was slightly awry. I thought I could hold this town, and you in it, for the amount of time that I required. And so I could, as far as the local citizenry are concerned. But now the British are involved, and the Americans too."

"I don't know what in hell you're talking about," Dain said.

"I'm talking about oil," Hakim said. "In the Middle East, everything becomes a question of oil."

"Not in this case."

"Yes, in this case too. The British, and more recently the Americans, have a great interest in the Trucial Coast and the various independent little sultanates and sheikhdoms. They find them much easier to deal with than larger independent countries like Saudi Arabia and Iraq and Iran. They love them dearly, those little desert dictatorships, and they would probably fight to keep them independent—as long as they remained pliable. Well, we in Iraq have been having our troubles recently with some of our foreign markets, and the British in Bahrein got word that I was here, and conceived the ridiculous notion that I and my handful of men constituted an Iraqi advanced guard, a beachhead, and that we were going to press an old territorial claim to the north coast of Qatar where the Dukhan oil fields are situated."

"How did they learn you were here?" Dain asked.

"I don't know for sure," Hakim said, "but I have my suspicions. Still, that is of no consequence just now. The important fact is that the British acted upon their suspicions with the sporadic promptness for which they are famed. They have dispatched a patrol boat from Bahrein, and it should arrive here in Shaqiq in a matter of hours."

"That will probably be unpleasant for you," Dain said.

"Yes, it could be. *Very* unpleasant. Someone in the town would talk, and the British would discover an Iraqi in Qatar under false papers, with a party of armed men. It would be

bad for me, but it would be even worse for my country. We have no desire for incidents like this."

"How did you learn about this gunboat?"

"By short wave, through the services of a friend of mine in Bahrein."

"You could claim that the whole thing was a misunderstanding."

"That is exactly what I plan to do," Hakim said. "My men and I will be here when the British arrive—there is no place for us to go in this desolate country anyhow. But we shall be without weapons, the personal guests of one of the local officials. We will be a fact-finding committee, touring the Persian Gulf area in order to collect certain statistics. I can make that story stick. The British will be embarrassed and will apologize."

"And what about the boat that was shipwrecked here the other night?" Dain asked. "What about the American who was held prisoner?"

"The fact that the kutiyah was wrecked here was no fault of mine," Hakim said. "Majid will not talk. I have further ensured his loyalty to me by making him a business partner. Two kilos of opium, and a promise of more to come. Your Rakkans are en route to Oman. It will be some weeks before they can be found and their stories unraveled. By then, the affair will be of no importance."

"And what about the American prisoner?"

"Do you mean the mysterious American who came in the Persian kutiyah?" Hakim asked. "Again, no problem. 'A mysterious man,' I will tell the British. 'Quite secretive. He stayed the night with me, and then departed in great haste for Doha.' I will suggest that if they want to know anything more about you, that they ask you in person."

"And where will I be?" Dain asked.

"In Doha, I assume," Hakim said. "It is where you want to go, isn't it?"

"You're letting me go?"

"Certtainly. I would much rather have completed my job, of course. But an international incident is to be avoided at the moment. And in any event, the Rakkan affair is of minor importance. The leaders of the independence movement are talkative old dreamers. It would have been nice to have let them start their little revolt, and then crush it in a single quick blow, a blow struck so fast that the newspapers would scarcely have noticed it. Now the revolt will be postponed, the in-

dependence movement will still exist. We will have to be vigilant; but then, we usually are."

"The whole thing is senseless," Dain said, half to himself.

"Most things are senseless," Hakim said. "All we can do is act expediently; then, later, if it works out, we call it rationality. At the moment, it seems most expedient for me that you stay alive and healthy, in order that you can answer some interesting questions the British may ask you."

"I'm still not sure you mean it," Dain said.

"Then come with me and see for yourself." Hakim gave a little bow, then walked to the door and flung it open with a lordly gesture.

Chapter 21

The Twelfth Day

Hakim did nothing by half-measures. He took Dain and Jabir out of the house and into the town of Shaqiq. He presented them to the local headman and the three most prominent merchants. Many compliments were exchanged, and Hakim insisted upon loaning Dain his own car for the forty-mile trip to Doha. He also gave him his driver, and two armed men to make sure he arrived safely. He saw them off with a smile and a wave.

They maintained a fair rate of speed on the forty-mile trip to Qatar's capital. The trip was made in silence. Jabir had not yet recovered from his illness; he lay back in the seat with his eyes closed and his hands across his stomach. The driver concentrated on driving, the guards had nothing to say, and Dain was thinking.

They arrived in Doha shortly before noon. The driver took them past the main square and parked in front of a two-story gray-white building.

"This is the headquarters of the Rakkan Independence Movement," he told Dain. "You will find the men you seek on the second floor."

"Thanks," Dain said.

"It was entirely my pleasure," the driver said. As soon as Dain and Jabir were out, he turned the car around and started back to Shaqiq.

The Committee had rented the entire second floor. The three of them—Raoudi, Luht, and Bekr—were there, just the three of them in a great cheerless room. Radio equipment covered one wall, and there were a few cane-backed chairs, some tables with pastry crumbs and coffee cups on them, and a few couches.

Dain put Jabir down on a couch. Old Bekr hastily put away a magazine and composed his long face into its usual expres-

sion of spurious dignity. Raoudi folded his newspaper. Luht, who had been writing, put down his pen.

Luht said, "We feared you would not arrive."

"I feared it myself," Dain said.

"What is wrong with Jabir?"

"It must have been something he ate."

"Well. . . . We must have your report at once."

Dain gave it, and watched their faces as they heard about the Iraqi brigade poised outside of the city.

"Bad, very bad," Raoudi said. He blinked and pulled at his sparse little beard. "All our work, all our planning . . ."

"Might not the brigade have left by now?" Bekr asked.

"No," Luht said, "the damned brigade hasn't left." He stood up and paced the room, tall and cadaverous, energetic and impatient. "There is nothing to be done," he told the others. "The revolution must be postponed. Are we agreed on that?"

Raoudi and Bekr both hesitated a moment, then nodded. Luht said, "Mr. Dain, I cannot at this moment adequately express our appreciation. You are in an unpleasant position—the bearer of bad news is never properly thanked. But our deepest thanks are there all the same, believe me."

"That's okay," Dain said.

"We have a suite for you in the Hotel Paris, which is just diagonally across the square. It is not a very good hotel, I am afraid, but it is the best that Doha has to offer."

"That's very kind of you," Dain said.

"And we have arranged air accommodations. There is a morning flight from Qatar to Amman. From there you can transfer to a plane to Europe or America."

"Fine, fine," Dain said. He sat down in one of the cane-backed chairs.

Luht said, "Don't you want to freshen up after your long trip, Mr. Dain?"

"There's no rush," Dain said. "I thought I'd wait."

"Wait? Wait for what?"

"I thought I'd like to hear the message canceling the uprising."

Raoudi frowned. "Our radio operator is out eating his lunch just now."

"That's all right."

"He may be gone for an hour or two."

"Well, I'm in no hurry. Although I'd think you would be."

"Mr. Dain," said Raoudi, "are you trying to imply something?"

"It's possible. And I think that you're trying to tell me something."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?" Luht asked.

Dain sat up straighter in the chair. "Look," he said, "why don't we stop playing around? You don't intend to cancel the uprising, do you?"

They all stared at him for a moment in silence. Raoudi tried to say something indignant, but his heart wasn't in it. Bekr continued to try to look dignified. Luht smiled and said, "No, we don't intend to cancel it, Mr. Dain."

"Why not?"

"To explain that," Luht told him, "you would have to possess some understanding of real politics."

"Try me," Dain said.

"Very well," Luht said. "The primary fact you must keep in mind is this: Rakka is ready and primed for an immediate revolution. The process is historical and irreversible. In a real sense, we, their leaders, do not lead them in this. We follow and anticipate their desires. If we did not do this, we would be unacceptable to them as leaders.

"But we in this room also know that a successful revolution is impossible just now, and probably will remain so for many months or even years to come. The people don't know that and cannot accept it. They are overripe; they will revolt, driven by forces they do not comprehend. And they will fail. That much is certain. It remains only for us to determine our position in this inevitable and preordained debacle.

"We cannot be *against* the revolution. Rakka will have it anyhow, and if we will not lead it, other less capable men will take our places. The new leaders would, quite naturally, put the onus of failure on us. So we would accomplish nothing and gain nothing by trying to hold back the inevitable.

"Similarly, we cannot be *for* the revolution, and have it fail. An overt failure would also cost us the leadership.

"Therefore we must simultaneously plan the revolution with enthusiasm, and also be blameless when it fails."

"That's a nice position if you can get it," Dain said.

"We saw no reason why we could not get it," Luht said. "Frankly, we never believed that you would get back here from Rakka in time to deliver your message. Thus, we could let the revolution proceed, and put the blame—the inadvertent blame

—on you." Luht shook his head sadly. "That would have been the easiest way all around, Mr. Dain, don't you think?"

"Maybe it would have been the easiest way for you," Dain said, "if one grants the correctness of your original premises. And maybe I would have deserved being the fall guy if I had actually failed. But I did resent your actively trying to make me fail."

"How did you come to realize that?" Luht asked.

"A few things happened which simply shouldn't have happened. First there was the matter of my cover. It was a pretty good cover, and there was no reason for it not to hold up indefinitely, barring unforeseen accidents. There were no accidents, none that I could see, none that I heard about. And yet my cover was blown within two days.

"Next there was that ersatz Omani messenger with Raoudi's ring. That was very much in the Committee's style, but it didn't work out because Ben Alyma knew something about horses.

"After that we crossed the frontier into Saudi Arabia, and the Saudis, your friends and allies, suddenly began chasing me. Why should they, unless one of you asked them to?

"By then it was painfully apparent that we had a leak, and from the quality of the information it had to be coming from someone on the Committee. Who? Well, you men have worked together for twenty years and you know each other pretty well by now. In view of your long association, I figured you all had to be in on it. But I also knew that someone else had to be doing the actual work.

"The leakage had to be coming from someone on the scene, someone who could take care of the various daily or hourly changes in plan as they occurred. Maiyidh didn't have access to enough information. Ben Alyma had in all innocence countermanded the Committee's order to kill me; and he seemed too simple-minded to think of betraying his friends for the sake of a dubious political gambit. That left Jabir, the Committee's man, operating on the Committee's orders."

"Nicely reasoned," Jabir said. "It doesn't matter what he knows, now, does it, Sayyid Luht?"

"Not in the least," Luht said.

"Well then," Jabir said, "I was indeed your betrayer. The Committee didn't order me to kill you, however; not if I could avoid it. Your death would have been politically unwise. The Committee simply wanted you delayed until the revolt had begun. I was told to use any means I thought best to achieve

that end. The most clear-cut way was to telephone the Iraqi commandant, Colonel Zeyd."

"An anonymous call?" Dain asked.

"Not at all. At the time I was a disreputable merchant named Suleiman; a homeless man, known to the Iraqis as a petty informer. This role gave credence to my information, and removed any suspicion from the Committee."

"After that you became Jabir?"

"Yes. Jabir is a role I play rather well, I think."

"Who will you be tomorrow?"

"Someone else," Jabir said carelessly. "My role will depend upon the necessities of the situation and the requirements of the Committee. . . . But getting back to Rakka. Nothing more would have been required if Colonel Zeyd had done his job properly. Since he didn't, I had to try the Harb messenger with a copy of Raoudi's ring. But that idiotic Harbi rode in on his own Shawaf mare, which couldn't possibly have come from Oman. Ben Alyma identified the horse—wrongly—as belonging to the Rubiah in Iraq. That false identification saved you a lot of trouble, Dain, and it forced me to extreme measures.

"I asked for Saudi assistance. And as a final safeguard, I telephoned Hakim. This time I was neither Suleiman nor Jabir. I was someone else, and I promised to deliver you to the port of Shaqiq in Qatar."

"How did you think you'd bring that one off?" Dain asked.

"I didn't think I would really have to," Jabir said. "I thought the Saudis would stop you, or I would do the job myself. But the Saudis failed, and it was my bad luck to become ill. Still, even sick, it was no great effort to bribe Captain Majid into opening the seacocks of his kutiyah when we were only a mile or so from Shaqiq."

Jabir smiled mournfully. "But even that had an unfortunate ending, from my point of view. Due to political pressures, Hakim released you. That was truly unforeseen. It would have been infinitely preferable if I had been capable of dealing with you myself."

"It's always best when you can do these things for yourself," Dain agreed. "But your sickness wasn't exactly a case of bad luck."

Jabir sat up on the couch. "What do you mean?"

"Once I was convinced that you were the hatchet man, I knew I had to take care of you before you took care of me. So I poisoned you."

"You? You poisoned me?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that I did."

"Dain, I would not have believed you capable of it. What did you give me?"

"A Peruvian substance called Camotillo," Dain said. "It was no trouble slipping it into your food."

"You had this poison with you all the time?" Luht asked incredulously.

"That and a few other things," Dain said. "You never know what you might need in this line of work."

Jabir, looking shaken but still not convinced, asked: "If you knew that I was your betrayer, then why didn't you kill me outright with your Camotillo?"

"I needed to have you alive for my own protection," Dain said. "I was determined to do the job I had promised to do, even though the Committee wanted me to fail. If I had killed you too soon, the Committee would have tried some other way of stopping me. As it was, they continued to rely on you."

Jabir groaned and turned his face to the wall. Dain said to Luht, "I'd be interested in knowing what you're going to do now."

"Nothing is changed," Luht said. "Everything goes on as planned. We send no canceling message, the uprising takes place and is suppressed by the Iraqis. The blame falls on Mr. Dain, who failed to deliver the all-important message; and also on America, which at the last minute withheld our all-important arms, planes, and so forth."

"Aren't you forgetting," Dain said, "that I *did* deliver the message on time? And that the U.S. never promised you any aid?"

"We have forgotten nothing," Luht said. "But that is what we will say, and what the Rakkans and the rest of the world will believe."

"I can prove it isn't so," Dain said.

"It doesn't matter what you can *prove*," Luht said. "The question is, what can you make men *believe*? If you remember Cuba, and several other American fiascos, then you must admit that our version is more credible. But beyond that, you will have failed, Mr. Dain, *because we will say that you have failed*. And we will say so louder, more frequently, and more vehemently, than you can say the opposite. We will outcommunicate you, Mr. Dain, and in today's world, communications are the key to power."

"Aren't you overrating your resouces?" Dain asked.

"I don't think so," Luht said. "Not if you look at the situa-

tion realistically. We are not opposing the communicatory power of the United States of America; merely that of Stephen Dain, a clandestine worker for a semisecret organization which strives for the greatest privacy. Your organization will not fight us, since to do so would mean destroying their usefulness. You, personally, might, but what could you do? At best, you could write some articles or a book explaining 'what really happened.' That sort of thing used to be a favorite pastime of retired British officers. I doubt if it will bring you any more exoneration than it brought them.

"Against your hypothetical book, we have immediate and nearly unlimited access to radio, television, and newspapers, with their audience numbering in the tens of hundreds of millions. This gives us the power of saturating the world with our story, until at last it becomes truth. It gives us the power to rewrite history, and therefore to have abstained from any bad decisions. I'm sure you can see that the man who controls communications is the only man who can produce credence, thereby getting his version of things accepted by the masses."

Dain nodded. "That's probably all true—in theory. But the applications are possibly a little more difficult. You Machiavellis of the east Arabian coast rate yourselves a little too highly. You overvalue your cynicism, and you rely too heavily on other people's stupidity. And I suppose it's also inevitable that your lack of self-honesty makes it difficult for you to understand yourselves or other people."

"Lack of self-honesty?" Luht said. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that you have a completely false picture of yourselves. You are not the subtle, clever men you think you are. You're penny-ante politicians with a love of complication, of intrigue for its own sake. You've lived for a long time on the contributions of your compatriots, but now they're catching on, and you're scrambling around for a way to hold onto them."

"We do of course live on their contributions," Bekr said. "But you insult us unfairly. We truly desire a free and independent Rakka."

"That's very nice," Dain said. "I also truly desire a free and independent Rakka, also a free South Africa and Haiti. And I also truly desire—"

"All right," Luht said, "I think we have had enough of this. We have told you our plans. There remains to be decided only

this, Mr. Dain: which, among the limited roles we are able to assign you, will you adopt?"

"You mean that I actually have a choice of roles?"

"Certainly. The uprising must take place as planned, and must fail because of you. That much is inevitable. The question is, how do you personally wish to fail? For example, if you cooperate with us fully, we should be able to find some way of taking the major part of the blame for you. We could make your delay inadvertent, or blame it on the machinations of a Russian or Chinese agent, whom we could invent and document without difficulty. You still would not look *good*, since a failure is a failure; but you would also not look terribly bad."

"That's very decent of you," Dain said. "What if I don't cooperate?"

"Well—as long as you did not work actively against us, as long as you did not try to communicate your view of the matter, we could set you forth as a bungler, an inept and rather ridiculous American do-gooder. You would not be portrayed as a *bad* person; merely a futile one."

"That's an interesting portrait," Dain said. "What if I decide to work against you actively?"

"In that case, your character undergoes a change. We would have to say that you and your American rulers were against us from the start. Or, perhaps better, we could say that you were initially—though somewhat vaguely—for us, but were caught in the act by the Iraqis, and were induced by your national greed for oil and your obsessive fear of alienating any sovereign power into continuing ostensibly on our side, but with the intention of betraying us at the end. . . . Something like that; we can work out the details later."

"You've given me a lot of possible faces to wear," Dain said.

"Yes, we have," Luht said. "But you must tell us, Mr. Dain, now, immediately—which role do you choose?"

Dain got up from his chair, yawned, stretched, and rubbed his face wearily. "Look," he said, "it's been a long hard trip. We've had a very interesting talk, but I think I'll go to the hotel now and clean up."

"One moment," Luht said. "You haven't said which role you choose to play."

"You can forget about that nonsense," Dain said. "I'm not playing any role except the one I originally set out for myself. I've brought you the message, and you're going to cancel the uprising."

"I think not," Luht said.

"I think so," Dain said. "I've already told you that I had a fair idea of what was going on. But I came to Doha anyhow, since I found a way of getting my job done."

"And just what, exactly, did you find?" Luht asked.

"An Iraqi agent named Hakim, the man with whom Jabir had been in contact. Hakim caught up to us finally in Shaqiq. He had us. And then he let us go."

"He was forced to let us go," Jabir said from the couch. "There were political urgencies, a matter of international incident—"

"Did he really take you in with that line?" Dain asked. "International tension, British gunboats steaming from Bahrein. . . . You people have been weaving fairy tales for so long, you believe anything you hear."

"Suppose you tell us," Luht said, "why he *did* let you go?"

"Let's put ourselves into Hakim's position," Dain said. "He's a very good man, I'd say, and loyal to his cause."

Raoudi said, "His reputation is known to us."

"And your reputation is known to him," Dain said. "Well then, there we are in Shaqiq, and Hakim has taken me prisoner and has accomplished his mission. He knows what the message is, or what it must be: a cancelation of the revolt. And it's in his country's interests to have that revolt take place on schedule, so that it can be put down with the least wastage of time and men. He's gone to considerable time and expense to get his hands on me; and yet, he lets me go in time to accomplish my mission. He spins a song and dance about why he's letting me go, of course; but one good agent shouldn't really expect to con another good agent. If Hakim had wanted to hold on to me, he would have found a way of doing so even if the whole Royal Navy were steaming for Shaqiq.

"But he let me go. He was very friendly about it, introduced me to the various local potentates, and even loaned me his car and a couple of guards so that I would reach Doha in time to deliver this message of potential damage to Iraq.

"Why would he let me go, and why would he even expedite my arrival in Doha? Because Hakim learned something between the time of my capture and the time he let me go. Don't ask me how he found it out. I suppose he's got his own short-wave equipment in Shaqiq and his sources of information. But he learned or deduced one key fact that changed everything.

"He found out that you gentlemen weren't planning to cancel the uprising, not under any circumstances.

"This immediately changed the possibilities in the game. Hakim could let me go and the uprising would still begin as planned. It would be crushed, and the Committee's propaganda mill would start to grind. But to no avail. For Hakim would have proof of the Committee's nasty little scheme. He would have those Shaqiq officials to whom he so carefully introduced me, as well as Captain Majid and his sailors.

"Communication, I think you gentlemen told me, is the only real power in the world today. I agreed, with some minor reservations. But let's take it a step farther. Do you think that your one-horse public relations outfit can compete against Iraqi communications? Not a chance, and you damned well know it. They'll drown you in a sea of media. *They'll* write the history, not you. And do you know what history they'll write?"

No one spoke, so Dain went on. "They'll tell—in the newspapers, on radio and television—how they knew of revolt, *and of America's attempt to stop it.* Not that they want to make us look good; they'll invent a cynical reason for our actions. But they'll tell how an American agent did attempt, for whatever motive, to prevent useless bloodshed, and how the power-mad Rakkan Committee ignored him and let the uprising take place anyhow. And they'll be sure to explain the reasons for the Committee's actions: how power was slipping away from these ineffectual exiles, and how they were willing to sacrifice the Rakkan people for personal gain.

"It's pretty much the truth of the matter—which might also help a little. But truth or not, it'll end the revolt, and the independence movement, *and* the Committee."

Dain paused, rubbed his eyes, then continued: "Anyhow that's my analysis of it. You may be in rough shape if you cancel; but you're in an impossible position if you don't. Of course, the final decision is up to you. I'm going to take a bath."

Dain turned and started out of the room. Behind him, he could hear a babble of voices, and then Luht's voice rising above the others, saying, "There is no time for argument. Raoudi, get the radio operator."

"He's on his way now," Raoudi said. "And of course, you're right. We must cancel. But isn't there anything we can save from this debacle?"

"We must make an announcement," old Bekr said.

"An announcement!" Luht said. "Yes, we must make an announcement at once, we must think of something. . . ."

"Conceivably," Raoudi said, "we could emerge from this

with our reputations unimpaired. It is a question of phraseology, of proper emphasis—"

"Be quiet!" Luht said. "I am drafting a statement. . . . What do you think of mentioning Egyptian counter-espionage?"

As Dain reached the door he heard Jabir call to him in a feeble voice. Dain hesitated, then turned and walked over to the couch.

Jabir looked very bad. His cheeks had taken on a pronounced hollowness, and the skin was stretched over his face like yellowed parchment. Still, he managed to give Dain a mournful and ironic smile.

"This was very unkind of you," he told Dain. "Very, yes, extremely unkind. . . . Dain, I know nothing about this Camotillo. Will I recover soon, and will any of my faculties be impaired?"

"You won't recover," Dain said.

"Please, Dain! With proper hospital treatment, in Cairo or somewhere in Europe—"

"You won't recover," Dain said again. "The poison has been in you for too long. You'll live for another six months, maybe a year. Then you'll die of general paralysis of the nervous system. Camotillo poisoning is not particularly painful, but it's final."

Jabir rolled his head back and forth like a man trying to dodge an unavoidable blow. "You are a cruel bastard, and no true man," he said. "I merely tried to stop you; in return, you give me a slow death."

"No, that's not why," Dain said. "If it had just been a matter between you and me, I would not have used the Camotillo. But there was a great deal more involved."

"There was nothing more involved," Jabir said.

"You have a short memory," Dain said. "I would not have killed you for betraying me. But I felt that I had to settle accounts for the others."

"What others? What in God's name are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Hazza and Maziad, killed when we charged through the Saudi soldiers, and Amar, who died of wounds received during that charge. They thought you were their friend, and they died because you betrayed them to the Saudis. And I'm also talking about Hassan el Dihn el-Aoudi, the geologist who had seen the Iraqi brigade. You put that knife into his ribs, Jabir, so that no further message of the brigade could be sent out. You and Hassan were probably

talking about the great cause when you put the knife into him."

Jabir was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Hassan was laughing at a joke I had made; but his face was turned away. His murder is the only one that I truly regret."

"You don't have to regret it any longer," Dain said. "It's paid in full."

Dain went down the stairs and onto the street. He crossed, shading his eyes from the blinding white glare of the buildings, and went to his hotel. In his room he took a tepid bath, asked to be called in time for the morning flight to Amman, and then went to sleep.

Three days later, in Paris, he was trying to explain to Mr. Manley why the Rakkan revolution had been called off.

Mr. Manley was disappointed, of course, but not despondent. He was working presently on a Haitian revolution, a beautiful scheme, a clear-cut case of Good versus Evil, and with a superb chance of success.

Dain's lukewarm reaction piqued him somewhat. But Mr. Manley realized that the man *was* tired, and clearly in need of a rest. A few weeks in London or Paris would do Dain a world of good, and he would return to work in fighting trim.

But Dain didn't see it that way. He was planning to take an indefinite leave of absence rather than a few weeks' rest; and rather than spend his time in America or one of the European capitals, Dain was planning to go to a small and rather primitive island in the Pacific.

He wouldn't tell Mr. Manley what the island was called. But he did mention that the place received newspapers only about once a year, had no television, and that short-wave reception was sporadic and exceedingly poor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBERT SHECKLEY was born in New York in 1928 and was graduated from New York University. He worked as a landscape gardener, a pretzel salesman, a night barman and as assistant metallurgist in an aircraft factory before devoting his full time to free-lance writing in 1952.

Mr. Sheckley has lived in New York City all his adult life, except for periodic forays into the wilds of Mexico, Europe and the Middle East. *Time Limit* is his third book set in Arab countries, the fifth title in the Stephen Dain series and Robert Sheckley's seventeenth published book. Film and television credits include *Tenth Victim* and *The People Trap*. Three other stories are being filmed in Hollywood and in Europe. At present, Mr. Sheckley lives in New York with his wife and two-year-old daughter.

Too many men had already been brutally murdered—some were still dying agonizing deaths—and hundreds more could expect to be killed. The only hope for halting the senseless slaughter was STEPHEN DAIN, INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE...One man against a three-nation conspiracy and every Arab killer within a thousand miles!